

# PROCESSED WORLD 2.005



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# PROCESSED WORLD

Winter 2004-2005

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# TALKING HEADS 2004-5

**P**ROCESSED WORLD IS BACK (AGAIN). The last time we were back (again) was in 2001, September to be precise, with our 20th anniversary special issue. Maybe you saw it, but probably not. It got a little lost in the hubbub of “everything changing”... go figure.

We always called this introductory column “Talking Heads,” following the 1970s band and our own proclivity to stand around hawking magazines in San Francisco’s financial district wearing papier maché terminal heads, a habit we gave up more than fifteen years ago. But the incessant chatter of the anti-journalistic talking heads of U.S. media have come to saturate our environment in ways we could have never imagined when we started publishing back in 1981.

A few of us longtime *P*Wers have joined with some newcomers to start publishing regularly again. We are planning to appear annually for now, given the painful realities of publishing costs, distribution headaches, rent, etc. It is a hostile environment for small, subversive projects, especially publishing ones.

Nevertheless, in spite of the heartening appearance of other journals we greet fraternally (*The Baffler*, *LiP*, *Other*, *Mute*, *The Sarai Reader*, to name but a few), *Processed World* still has a unique role to play. This issue began with a call to describe “what the hell is going on out there?” and then morphed into an examination of life in a dying empire (“USSA”). As often happened in the past, neither suggested theme captured what finally appeared. Actually, no theme really unites the contents of this issue beyond our consistent interest in the condition of working and living.

As we go to press we are surrounded by the quadrennial madness that passes for politics in the U.S., the presidential election. This time around we get to choose between a wooden caricature of conservative corporatism and the palpable madness of a mental midget Christian zealot bent on maintaining a “Mcfriendly” global empire based on bombs and oil. Many will sit it out in disgust while others will hold their nose to repudiate the latter. In either case, the basic trajectory of global pillage, meteorological catastrophes, and rising barbarism seems tragically safe from derailment.

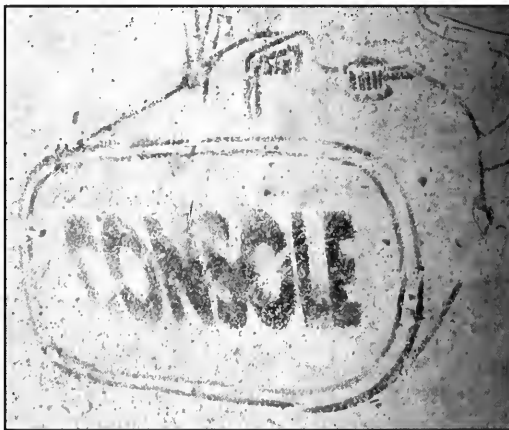
One of our pals recently commented, “sure the world is falling apart, but not fast enough to avoid being boring.” Perhaps tedious is a better way to characterize the larger dynamics we are forced to watch in slow motion, but meanwhile, in our daily lives there is still much to note.

Ramor Ryan takes us inside a banana boat in “High Seas Adventure.” The globe-straddling delivery systems on which our tenuous standards of living hang are themselves caught up in curious contradictions of exploitation, migration, desire, and coexistence. Sandwiched between an old-style German captain and a largely Filipino crew, he accompanies a boatload of bananas from sleepy, exotic Caribbean islands to the gaping maw of European consumerism at the port of Rotterdam. Along the way he searches the seas longingly for pirates, only to be stuck in the oblivious tedium of a hum-drum shipment of tropical fruit to the gray Old World.

Ramor’s is certainly a tale, but we have several more in this issue too. In “Trauma Tango,” Tom Messmer, who works the Emergency Room at San Francisco General Hospital, dissects the horrifying consequences of our dysfunctional medical system with surgical precision. “Starring Mr. Green, in the laundry room, with the knife” is our first second-generation contribution to *Processed World*. Our unnamed contributor gives us an

insider’s view of who is deciding our fate and how they go about it when we submit ourselves to the California Workman’s Compensation system. If you are “lucky” enough to get hurt on the job, depending on the attitude of the underpaid clerk at the other end of the process, you may be able to extend your time away from work or you may find yourself being followed by rent-a-cops trying to prove you’re committing fraud. But the fraudulent structure of work that systematically injures most workers, mentally or physically, and then denies adequate time to heal is what she really reveals. On a lighter note, long-time contributor Zoe Noe updates us on his never-ending saga of lost jobs with “Fucked by the Dildo Shop,” a tale of toil that painfully illustrates the hypocrisy of workers’ self-management in a feminist sex toy emporium.

Since the early 1980s *Processed World* has focused on the condition of white-collar wage-slaves, a category that has recently come to be called the “Cognitariat.” Similarly, the magazine has always paid special attention to the observable



fact that most of us are temporary workers, whether our jobs are so designated or not. This latter truth has recently set in across Europe where a more sophisticated political milieu has dubbed the workers newly made insecure as the “Precariat.” This issue features two articles that take different looks at our precarious, temporary existence. First Primitivo Morales returns with an examination of his “good job” as a highly skilled, relatively well-paid programmer in “On The Bleeding Edge.” He tries to unpack the curious conundrum facing thousands of workers across the planet. They are engaged in profoundly collaborative work processes and yet are part of an extremely atomized and fragmented workforce which has no conceptual sense of solidarity nor jargon-free language to describe it, let alone a practice of mutual aid. He describes some specific ways he has run aground in his workplace trying to address this predicament.

Taking a more broad look at the general insecurity that the new precariousness has imposed on the working class in America, Adam Cornford details the many facets of anxiety imposed in “Everyday Terror: The Insecurity State.” The noisy reinforcement of fear and loathing by the powers-that-be are the tip of a systematic iceberg of isolation, leaving many easily manipulated by fear-mongering campaigns and less likely to seek the solidarity that is the natural and powerful antidote.

Of course there is still opposition, and the plans of corporations and governments do not go forward uncontested. Though strikes and worker resistance are at historic lows, there are still the remnants of the once revered Union Movement. In “A Strike By Any Other Name” Natasha Moss-Dedrick shows how the United Food and Commercial Workers Union was as much to blame for the disastrous defeat in the 2003 southern California grocery workers strike as the powerful grocery chains like Safeway they were up against. The UFCW’s well-documented role in de-unionizing most meatpacking in the Midwest during the 1980s (covered

in Barbara Kopple’s documentary “American Dream,” reviewed in *Processed World* #30) helps to contextualize their otherwise puzzling behavior during this recent strike.

Recent actions contesting corporate globalization have “reclaimed the Commons” as a viable concept denoting our shared dependence on water, air and land, and as a way of extending a claim to a new sense of Commons encompassing shelter, food, and more. Ztangi thinks the feudalistic category of the Commons needs some critical analysis and provides it in “Reclaim the Commons?” Resistance these days often takes the form of “Technopranks,” as Jesse Drew outlines in his piece of the same name. Homeless families and their supporters successfully contest the San Francisco Housing Authority in “A World of Possibilities at 45 West Point,” showing that those with the least are sometimes the best at challenging the limits of political action.

We welcome back to these pages p.m. with his short story “No Nonsense,” a piece that challenges all of us to think through our vision of the world we’re fighting for. And in “Burning Man: A Working-Class DIY World’s Fair” Chris Carlsson recasts the famously hedonistic art festival in the surprising terms of working class recomposition.

We have book reviews to round out the issue, along with returning poets klipschutz, Raven, William Talcott, and Summer Brenner, plus our usual collection of art, photography and satirical images.

We will be moving to a new home in San Francisco next year and look forward to new projects in coming years. You are invited to participate and contribute. It’s time for a new generation to take *Processed World*’s subversive current to places we cannot anticipate. Please get in touch!

## PROCESSED WORLD

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### 848 COMMUNITY SPACE AND “NO ONE TURNED AWAY”

848 has been a popular, alternative gathering space in San Francisco for free-thinkers, free spirits, and cultural innovators over the last thirteen years. *Processed World* has had a fraternal connection through our shared nonprofit sponsor, CounterPULSE, and will soon move into a shared space. Here is how 848 has described itself: “848 is a community-access, do-it-yourself space available to artists, activists, community-builders for rehearsals, meetings, performances, rituals, art exhibits, and educational events. We have done and will continue to do almost anything! No one will be turned away for lack of money at any event held at 848. This means if you can’t afford to fully pay or at all you will be admitted without shame, guilt, or the usual trappings of class unconsciousness.”

From the first event held in 1991, 848 promoted a “no one turned away” policy. The honor system of “pay what you can” engenders a lively and inclusive gathering space. The NOTA policy does not result in reducing income. Instead, it catalyzes more flow into the space from people who might otherwise feel they can’t afford to attend. Simultaneously, those with higher incomes seem more inclined to give more beyond the low end of the sliding scale.

Creative adaptations of the NOTA policy first appeared in the 848 calendar of events in September, 1992 when jazz musician Tony Grasso replaced “no one turned away” with “no one turned into stone.” This stimulated a chain reaction re-framing NOTA line in relation to the event. *Processed World* is running these variations in tiny sideways type along the sides of pages scattered throughout this issue. An example is running alongside this page; others are on dozens of pages in this issue.

# HIGH SEA ADVENTURES

## OCEAN CROSSINGS IN SEARCH OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ATLANTIC

Ramor Ryan

I HAD BEEN AT SEA FOR ONLY TWO MONTHS, AND ALREADY I WAS SICK OF THE SAILOR'S LIFE to the bottom of my heart. Not the seaman's life as such, but the seafaring environment, the regimen on board the banana boats, the slave-like labor at the ports, and the immorality of the global banana trade that is pure naked exploitation, a pillaging of the South. My daytime activities painting or chipping rust and nighttime shift on watch are populated by fantastical notions of violent mutiny, hoisting the black flag, and setting sail with my fellow newly initiated pirate crew.

Such musings fall on absolutely uninterested ears. As we share a few beers in his cabin, I ask one of the Filipino deck hands, the most disgruntled of the lot, why, if life on the ship was so fucking miserable, didn't the crew organize to change things. "You know," I suggested jokingly, "like an old-school mutiny!"

Manuel, in his early twenties like me, laughed so hard that beer foam came out his nostrils. "Why would any of us think such a thing!? In 254 days I will be finished all this hell and I will return to Manila, buy my land, and farm with my wife and children. For us Filipinos this is the best job possible. Two years' labor at sea and then we are set up almost for life. There are many who would do anything for this job." He changes the subject, pressing a photo of a young woman into my hand. "She's pretty, isn't she? That's my sister. You could marry her, take her with you to Europe. She's a good cook, tidy."

I'm not making any progress here at all, so I take my leave.

### Bananas

We've been making the rounds of the Caribbean, picking up bananas at various ports.

Heading toward the Dominican Republic, our ship, the *MV Suriname*, a four-thousand-ton reefer vessel flying under a Panamanian flag, cuts through the breezy tropical sea at a steady eighteen knots.

Despite the infuriating working life on board this floating gulag, there is still an indescribable joy in walking the deck as we sail the gorgeous Caribbean Sea on flawless sunny days like today.

As the sun sets resplendently on the immense horizon, we pull into the small port of Manzanilla. "Half astern! Slow

astern!" shouts the captain as the huge ship careens dangerously toward the short, antiquated pier. "Dead slow!" Despite the choppy sea and the difficult undercurrents, we berth gently. The mooring lines are secured to the rusty bollards and we are docked once more. Hundreds of thousands of freshly harvested green bananas are to come aboard and be put in the cavernous refrigerated hold, a job that will take a full 24 hours to complete. Most of the crew stream ashore, preparing for a night of drunkenness and revelry. I still have my 4AM-to-8AM night

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**These "pirate utopias" were rebellious settlements premised on radical democracy and multiracial equality, oases of freedom in an increasingly brutal "civilized" world.**

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watch, though, even when moored, so I am spared the worst excesses of the night's revelries. From the quiet bridge I watch the longshoremen load the boxes by hand from the old banana freight train into our dark, mysterious bowels. It's

tiresome work, this endless loading, and if perchance any of the workers get lazy, there are armed guards posted to watch over them.

"What's with the guns?" I ask the second mate, who, more out of habit than need, continually checks the radar and the satellite navigator despite us being at port. "There was a docker strike here last month. They fired the leaders and are now making sure that the rest don't get any stupid ideas."

The captain comes on the bridge at dawn. "Zer good!" he says, referring to the hired guns. "Finally some security measures!" For him, the problem was the pilfering by the longshoremen or the hustling of stowaways on board. More guns was good news.

And it's the same at each port we dock at: in Puerto Cortes, Honduras; Puerto Cabezas, Guatemala; Independence, Belize; in Georgetown, Guyana; or Parimaribo, Suriname, the same regime of guns and suspicion, waterfronts filled with resentment and fear. The longshoremen are badly paid, their work haphazard, and when the big ships come in, the shifts last all day and night. As the disgruntled workers load the hold through the night, you get the feeling they would like to load themselves on, too. A melancholic mood dominates the rigorous work, all in the shadow of armed guards.

A few of the ship's crew almost didn't make it back in time. They came scrambling up the gangway with five minutes to spare and were clearly the worse for wear. The nightclubs and brothels of this little port town have taken on a mythical status in the eyes of some of the sailors. I hear the captain command the chief mate to punish the latecomers. "Chipping rust with the lawnmower for three days," he says sternly. That means being dispatched to the nether regions of the vessel to dislodge rust with a heavy, lumbering, noisy machine called a deck scaler. Ten minutes pounding with that thing and you are ready to jump down the hawse pipe for good. A maritime nightmare.

The great engines hidden deep inside the belly of the vessel rumble to life, the hefty mooring lines are taken off the bollards and gathered on board, men scurry around frantically on the dilapidated pier, and we are off, setting sail once more across the Atlantic Ocean.

### Into the Deep Blue Sea

It is almost dusk, and the sun is setting dramatically on the lush banana plantations surrounding the docks. From high up on the ship's bridge deck I can see far and wide. The tropical vegetation shimmers in a thousand shades of green, its pungent aroma mixing deliciously with the powerful fragrance of the fresh Caribbean Sea. The old rustic railway line runs out of the plantation and all the way up the pier. The decrepit train stands there almost derelict, its wagons bereft of their cargo. Dozens of workers stand around, exhausted after their grueling shift, relieved to see the bananas off. I spot the unctuous local banana agent, the only man in Manzanilla who wears a suit, waving us off overenthusiastically. Young couples gather to watch the huge ship slide out to sea—not much happens in these small port towns. Parents have brought their children, who wave sadly at our departure. Everyone is silent, dreaming of other lands, of migration, exodus, or desertion.

The great hulking ship turns 180 degrees in a wide lumbering arc. Now the bow faces the vast infinite ocean, and the quaint little Caribbean port town is left behind, becoming smaller and smaller as the horizon encloses it. The sea ahead is perfectly calm, a rav-

ishing sapphire blue, sparkling and inviting, and dolphins have appeared, leaping joyously about the hull. We have two weeks of open sea before us, as we sail from the mesmerizing translucent beauty of the Caribbean to the choppy grey European north Atlantic. We also have two weeks of monotonous factory work ahead of us, painting and chipping rust, doing watch, cleaning, and gazing out to sea, haunted and melancholic.

We are 18 men of diverse nationalities trapped within the steel confines of this floating prison, encumbered with an archaic maritime hierarchy, teeming with resentments and the petty everyday hassles of living in close quarters with a group of people not of your choosing. We may have rough weather, or engine difficulties, people will fall ill, and others will become overwrought by homesickness or lovesickness, a year away from their families and homes. The sailors will cling



to the fond memories of a couple of days onshore, the bustle of the port, the good people of Manzanilla, the late-night beer and revelry, and, for some, the delirious dawn shared with the industrious women of the Caribbean night.

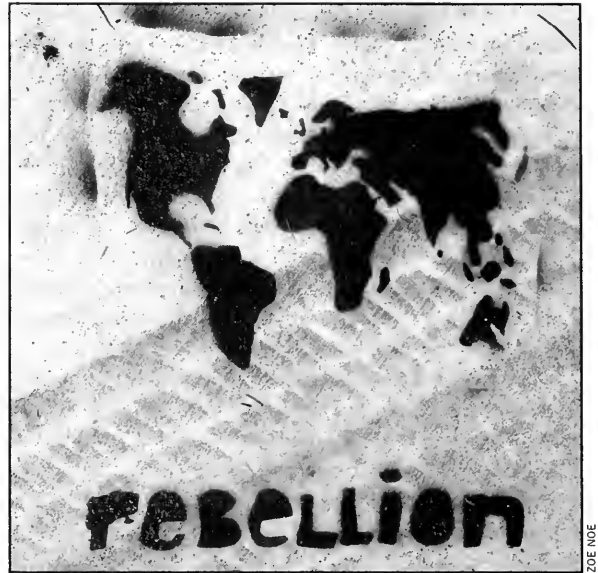
"Yah, Irishman, move your fucking ass, do some work." This from the great German wit—unfortunately, our captain. He is a big man with great ruddy cheeks and a thick beard. He has been a sailor all his adult life and is, as they say in the trade, confident of the sea. Typical of his class of European officer, his political persuasion lies somewhere to the far right of Le Pen. The captain, the chief engineer, the first mate, and perhaps the second engineer on any cargo ship of this line will be European—German, Dutch, or English—while the crew is generally from the global south—Filipino, Chinese, or Indonesian. The mid-ranking class will be Indian, Pakistani, or maybe unambitious hands of European nationalities.

I had the misfortune of spending a lot of time around the officer class on a variety of banana boats. Most of these guys had been at sea twenty years or so; they are frightening specimens of stunted humanity. "It would be better if I could flog them," remarked a Dutch captain, referring to the recalcitrant crew. An English captain insisted on referring to the Irish, Indian, and Pakistani crewmembers as "Us Brits." (Strangely, the Indian bosun, Raj, loved this; he even hung a portrait of Queen Elizabeth in the radio room to appease the captain). But this current captain, the bulbous German, was easily the most obnoxious of them all. "One time we sailed from Madagascar," he boasted while knocking back a brandy, "with ten stowaways in the hold. I ordered all the hatches locked shut and turned up the refrigeration. Those blacks froze to death!" His fellow officers chuckled in obedient chorus. It was unclear whether this was his idea of humor or multiple homicide.

These merchant vessels seem at times like theatres for simmering class war—class and race war. The European officer class, who all joined the merchant navy when these shipping lines were entirely white and European, resented the Asian employees because they were cheap labor: the maquiladorization of the fleets. The Asians in turn hated the Europeans because they were racist and unjust bosses. Language came between the two classes—how can an English captain order around a Chinese crew, demean them, whip them in line, and teach them obedience and the traditions of the sea if they can't understand one word he says? There was no common ground between the two.

Sailing with a Chinese crew one time, I tried to befriend them in the spirit of worker solidarity. I entered their dining quarters, bedecked with red flags and a portrait of Chairman Mao, and attempted to bridge the gap between English and Mandarin. My efforts came to zero. They suspected a spy, an infiltrator who would only harm them in the end. They wanted nothing to do with me. I was white, so I was ejected, quite politely.

The Filipinos were different. They were more westernized.



Many were born-again fundamentalist Christians, Bible-thumping sailors. This didn't stop them from filling the boredom of off-duty hours with some hardcore lesbian porn movie. Others tried to set me up with their sister, proffering photos of pretty young girls and claiming they would do whatever I desired—if I married them. It was a liability being white below deck. I worked alongside them all day, chipping rust or painting, we shared surreptitious beers in their cabins (drinking was outlawed on the ship), we discussed the Bible, we shared watch, and yet they always considered me other. Maybe because I was invited to eat at the officers' table.

The European officers took me under their wing as a cadet, as a young man who obviously needed guidance. Also, I was white. I was invited to dine with them, always a traumatic occasion. These old fascist codgers would try to plant the old salty sea dog number on me, as if they were wise old men who knew the ropes. As sailors, as workingmen, they did—they knew the boat, they knew the sea, they knew how it all worked, and they got the goods there on time. This was understood, and this was why they were paid a fair wage for a job well done.

The problem arose when we ventured beyond the old salty sea dog paradigm. We sat around a table three times a day for two weeks at a time, and if any other subject arose—politics, culture, sports—we had stormy waters. If it wasn't their desire for more immigration laws, it was their admiration of Margaret Thatcher; if it wasn't their desire to see all Arabs wiped off the face of the earth, it was their support for the loyalist Rangers football club, and me a Celtic supporter. Even though they were Europeans, white men like me, I felt extraordinarily ill at ease in their company. To complicate things further, I was a "man of letters," an intellectual in their eyes (I read books). They hated intellectuals, the liberal media, people of color, and, most of all, feminists. They were angry and cynical men filled with hubris.

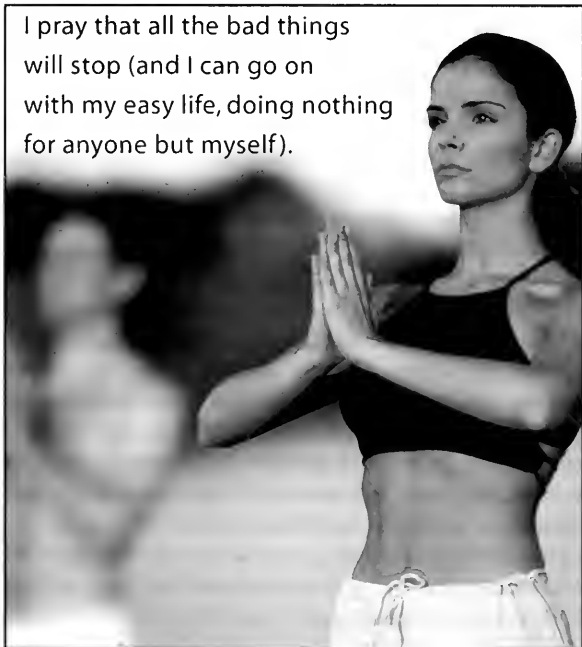
One night I got drunk in the lavish cabins of the German chief engineer. At 60, he was older than most of the other officers I had encountered, and a certain weariness informed his discourse, which made him more tolerable than the more arrogant types. As the night wore on, and his more outlandish fascist statements were tempered by sentimentality and melancholy, he became maudlin and honed in on one overwhelming theme. “I want to be free!” he said. “I want to be free from this shitty ship and this shitty job, and the fucking engine room and this shipping company. I want to be free of my boring wife and my damned family and my suburban home; I want to be free to take off around the world and just to be free. I want to be free!” The tiresome old bore went on like this for a long time, and finally we had found some common ground. Not much, just a desire for freedom, to roam, to be unrestricted. We clinked our glasses in grim complicity.

### The Dawn Watch

Afterwards I went up to the bridge for my 4AM-to-8AM watch. The kindly Filipino second mate intimated that I should drink lots of coffee to sober up. I explained to him what happened, how I ended up drinking all night with the chief engineer. I told him how I found the chief engineer, in the end, a decent enough man, even if he was a bit of a nazi. The second mate smiled and uncharacteristically revealed a gem of gossip. “They say he has fallen in with a Brazilian mulatto in Suriname. He wants to marry her and live on the coast of Bahia with her. He is a new man now, repenting his dark past, his bad treatment of the Filipinos. The crew has grown fond of him.”

The second mate, a soft-spoken grey-haired man in his 50s,

I pray that all the bad things  
will stop (and I can go on  
with my easy life, doing nothing  
for anyone but myself).



CHRIS CARLSSON

abruptly returned to business, as if he had let down his guard by speaking so openly with me. He turned to the radar, wrote briefly in the logbook, and then retired to the chartroom.

I was left alone on the bridge in the darkness, the ship plunging through the deep night and the coffee percolating on the desk. The ship was rolling gently as we steamed full-ahead at a steady 20 knots and not a blip on the radar.

The 4AM-to-8AM watch shift is the romantic shift—you get to watch dawn rising across the vast horizon, and it is a magnificent vista, changing subtly every morning as we traverse the Caribbean to the Atlantic or vice versa. Every hour we would note our position and the sailing conditions in the logbook—and I would attempt to induce the second mate into conversation. But he was a wary man, and I got the feeling he didn’t feel he had much to say about himself. He was at sea eight years and did not express any great love for the sailor’s life, although he considered himself privileged to have a well-paid job. His sole wish was to return to the Philippines, his family, the plot of land he had managed to buy, and farm away the rest of his life. I got the distinct feeling that the sailor’s life for him was one step up from a chain gang. Strangely, I never did get his name the whole voyage; everybody simply referred to him as “the second mate.” On the door to my cabin was the title “Spare Officer.” Did they refer to me colloquially on board as “the spare officer”?!

How calm was the bridge in the depth of night! I would check the various instruments and stare into the darkness, peering for whatever obstacle might lie in our path—fishing boats, meandering whales, or North Atlantic wanderlust-stricken icebergs. I never saw anything. I would listen to the BBC World Service, sip coffee, and, rocked by the gentle pitch and the somnolent ocean air, fall into a calm reverie thinking about my favorite maritime topic—pirates.

### Passing a Pirate Enclave

“During the Golden Age of piracy in the 17th and 18th centuries, crews of early proletarian rebels, dropouts from civilization, plundered the lucrative shipping lanes between Europe and America. They operated from land enclaves, free ports; “pirate utopias,” located on islands and coastlines as yet beyond the reach of civilization. From these mini-anarchies—“temporary autonomous zones”—they launched raiding parties so successful that they created an imperial crisis, attacking English trade with the colonies, and crippling the emerging system of global exploitation, slavery and colonialism....”

PIRATE UTOPIAS, *DO OR DIE*, NO. 14

The Caribbean teems with the ghosts of the pirate world, and the pirate utopias once dotted around the region remain part of the cherished folklore. There is still a tangible sense of piracy in the air, provoked by the great extremes of wealth and poverty starkly coexisting in the Caribbean. Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, is a short boat ride from the Virgin

Islands, playground of the rich and famous. And it was here that I got my first taste of the “threat” of latter-day pirates.

We had been delayed loading bananas at the Honduran port of Puerto Cortes, and the captain was acting edgy all morning. His task now was to make up time on the crossing. He could cut through the infamous Tortuga Channel, a narrow slipstream between the Haitian coast and the small island of Tortuga. The danger was that the channel was less than a kilometer wide and populated by a lively band of latter-day pirates in rubber dinghies equipped with powerful outboard engines and AK-47s. They would speed out in groups and seize a passing ship by throwing ropes up over the side and clambering aboard. The size of the ship makes it difficult to guard the whole length of the vessel; pirates can climb aboard, break into the metal containers, and steal anything that can be dropped into the rubber dinghies below. Or they can simply hold the crew at gunpoint and do exactly as they please.

After much contemplation, the captain decides to go the Tortuga Channel route. “We’ll save four hours,” he says to the first mate. “It must be done.”

The crew, some armed with handguns, is dispersed along both sides of the deck to ward off the potential robbers. We enter the narrow channel. Small settlements are visible on both coastlines—multitudes of little huts with not a large building in sight. The channel is a few kilometers long. Dozens of little boats crisscross it—battered old fishing boats, rustic ferries packed with people, and the “suspicious” little inflatable dinghies. The captain could go full speed, ensuring that we pass too quickly for any pirate to catch up, but also creating havoc for the locals due to the violent wake of the passing ship. Little boats might overturn, or we might simply run over slow vessels. Basically, by going a reckless 20 knots, we would be crashing through, causing untold damage—drownings even—just to stave off the pirates. The captain, a real bastard, is tempted.

He discusses the dilemma with his German buddy, the chief engineer. I don’t understand German, but it is clear that the chief engineer is talking the captain down from his reckless path. Almost begrudgingly, the captain orders a reduction in speed.

By this stage I am positively pissing myself with excitement. I would present any potential pirates clambering aboard with my assistance. This is the historical Tortuga, one of the earliest pirate republics! This little island off Hispaniola was once the scourge of the Caribbean. C.L.R. James writes in *The Black Jacobins*, “In 1629 some wandering Frenchmen settled.... To Tortuga came fugitives from justice, escaped galley slaves, debtors unable to pay debts, adventurers, men of all crimes and nationalities. Slaughter, internecine [warfare] followed for 30 years....” James, no friend of the pirates and buccaneers, saw them as dropouts and criminals. Other historians frame the Caribbean pirate enclaves in more favorable and



revolutionary terms: these “pirate utopias” were rebellious settlements premised on radical democracy and multiracial equality, oases of freedom in an increasingly brutal “civilized” world founded upon slavery and exploitation of the “New World.” While a good portion of the pirate community was comprised of mutinous sailors from the merchant privateers or the imperial navies, many others were “a melting pot of rebellious and pauperized immigrants from across the world—thousands of deported Irish..., Royalist prisoners from Scotland, Huguenots, outlawed religious dissenters..., captured prisoners of various uprisings, Diggers and Ranters, runaway slaves and rebellious proles...” (*Do or Die*). The original buccaneers got their name from boucan, the practice of the Arawak Indians of smoking beef. The Atlantic rebels “went native” and made common cause with the indigenous groups. The self-organization of these pirate communities, not just in Tortuga, but in Honduras, the Bay of Campeche, and all over the Caribbean, represented a genuine alternative society in the 17th century. These were the autonomous municipalities of their day.

Disappointingly, we pass through the Tortuga Channel without even so much as a hint of a Jolly Roger gracing the horizon. The captain chuckles coarsely as we pull out once more into the open sea. “Yah, fucking assholes too busy screwing their mothers to take us on, ha-ha!” This captain is a real comedian; he has us in stitches all day. He’s forever shouting at the Filipino crew, “Stop staring at your shoes like Imelda Marcos, get to work, ha-ha!” The workers shuffle away without a word. I wasn’t expecting a motley crew of latter-day rebel sailors, but neither was I expecting such a browbeaten obedient lot. What of the secret history of the revolutionary Atlantic, the

treasured tradition of mutiny and raising the black flag?

The romantic maritime, it seems, is dead and gone; it's with Anne Bonny in the grave.

## Troubled Waters

Next afternoon, the sea was calm as I painted the starboard boat deck with a long roller. My peaceful daydreaming was disturbed by the chief steward summoning me before the captain. Of all the Filipinos, this guy, a Jehovah's Witness, was the most dangerous. The other Filipinos distrusted him, and I had already had a bit of a run-in with him. He's a big fan of U.S. military bases in the Philippines. His ambition is to open a McDonalds franchise in his home town, Malabang on Mindanao. I earned his displeasure by laughing as he waxed lyrical on the wholesomeness of the McDonalds menu.

The captain is seated behind his desk in his office with impressive nautical charts rolled out in front of him. He is grunting to himself somewhat boorishly. Over his shoulder hovers the twitching chief steward, and through the portholes I can see the cargo stacked on the expansive deck tilting gently with the pitch of the ship.

I may be in trouble.

"Are you writing some kind of investigation about this shipping company?" the captain asked directly, fondling his beard and looking like the meanest bastard you could possibly imagine. He continues that the chief steward, "while changing the cabin linen," found some written notes I had carelessly left on the desk. I glance at the sycophantic steward with a burning stare.

"I like to keep a journal, Captain, but it definitely isn't written for the eyes of the chief steward."

The captain was clearly reveling in the whole situation. He could be his very own Gestapo!

"Ve are concerned that the confidentiality of the shipping line has been violated."

A company man, he went on to outline how I had been taken on in good faith by the director, and I was abusing that trust by intending to publish an account unhelpful to the shipping line.

"Are you a journalist?" he asked directly, his eyes burning into me nastily.

And this is the thing: I was doing a little research with the aim of exposing some trade injustices, but nothing about the shipping line or this man's sacred fucking shipping company. I was looking into the bananas. My concern was bananas.

But I had an alibi. "Captain, I'm writing a short eclectic piece for the seaman's union magazine about life on board a modern vessel, comparing it to the old romantic idea of life at sea during the so-called Golden Age of shipping. I am writing an article that merely expresses the discontent of the crew, their lack of interest in the sailor's life, and how big ships are more like floating factories, but nothing damaging to the shipping company."

The captain looked at me crookedly. His eyes narrowed and he pulled at his beard. I have drunk with this man, he has told me his stories, I have shared his space, and I suspect he might actually have a soft spot for me. "You ask a lot of questions," he said. "You are a good listener. You are young and idealistic. I believe you." He broke into a cunning smile. "I will help you with your article, and we will print it in the company bulletin, too."

"That's great," I mumble feebly. I cast a nasty glance at the chief steward. Fucking scumbag rat. I will have a word with the other Filipinos about this—they don't like him either.

## A Motley Crew

But they weren't interested. I told my mate Manuel, the young disgruntled Filipino deckhand, what had happened, how the chief steward had ratted on me to the captain.

"The steward is a dog," laughed Manuel, "we expect that from him." He changed the topic to the nocturnal delights in some seedy Manzanilla brothel. Another crew member enters, a guy even younger than Manuel, and his line was that the chief steward did no wrong. "He was only doing his duty."



A SAFE SEX RITUAL FOR MEN/no man turned away for lack of queer or group sexperience.

ZOE NOE

Later that night on watch, the second mate chided me. "Don't worry about these things. You should keep your head down and do your work." That is what he says about every problem. It drives me crazy. Why don't these people stand up for themselves?

I found an excuse to leave and made my way to the very bow of the ship, as far from the bridge and the rumbling engines as possible, past the lines of freight containers, past the stored mooring lines and various accoutrements, down to the end of the forward deck. Like a world apart, here at the very tip of the ship is a little platform that hangs over the water. The hull drops at a sharp angle below, so when you sit perilously on the edge, grasping the metal bars, dangling your legs, it is as exhilarating as a fairground ride. The ship pitches more dramatically at the bow, and the tumultuous sea churns about ten meters below. The spray of surf wets your face, and the delicious aroma of the salty sea overwhelms the senses. Sometimes dolphins chase the ship here, leaping delightfully about the hull. I'm sure this place has a name—everything has a nautical term—but I don't know what they call it. For me, it was my place of wild solace, alone as you can be on a ship, plunging through the dark sea in the deep of night.

### **A Valediction to Imperial Hydrarchy**

I'm chipping away at rust with a handheld jackhammer on the port-side bridge wing. The work is monotonous, and the scraping noise is driving me nuts. I've been at this all afternoon. I suspect this is part of the captain's punishment for my misdemeanors.

Suddenly the whole horizon becomes filled with a great wall of water, hundreds of meters tall, as an extreme storm wave sweeps in from the winter north Atlantic.

The captain's guffaw interrupts my dreamtime flights of fancy. "Yah come on Irish scholar, let's see if you can write even with all those blisters, ha-ha!" He beckons me into the chartroom, where a computer lay idle. "Use this to write your fantastic article!" he said, rubbing his hands together merrily, maybe expecting some whimpered excuses. "Now!" he added, as if cracking a whip.

But (cunningly) I had thought about this the previous night, whiling away the hours on watch, and had prepared a potential article to humor the stupid bastard.

I began banging on the keyboard, pandering to the captain by beginning with a quote from an old traditional Irish sailor's song *The Sea Rover*, one of his favorites when maudlin and drunk.

*I am an old sea rover and the blood through my veins,*

*Is fresh and salty as the sea....*

I went on to describe the attributes of the crew of the *MV Suriname*, how they were "confident of the sea," and other clichés, but that the romantic age was over, and the salty sea did not flow through these people's blood, only the necessity to work for a living, a shitty living at that, locked up on a ship for months on end. I lamented the loss of the albatross as a symbol of the sailor—a creature who only lands to mate—and suggested that a more appropriate symbol for the modern worker on board would be a caged parrot. Maybe some of the old traditions were gallantly carried forth by the superannuated licensed officer class (I have in mind the preposterous rank system and the tendency to resort to juvenile punishments for crew "misbehavior," but that remains unstated), but theirs is a leviathan task to revive archaic practices. I entitled the piece *A Valediction to Imperial Hydrarchy*.

The captain looked a mite confused and then chuckled approvingly. "Yes you can write! This is ok! Mourning the lost traditions, yes" And he left me there, not mentioning the remaining rusting to be done, so I took the opportunity to write about bananas for the rest of the afternoon.

I brought the writing up for the second mate to peruse during the 4AM-to-8AM watch. He read it and laughed sardonically. "It is good," he said, "but it is naive. There is no mystery to the sea, it is simply the ocean and we are a metal box floating on top of it, and it is dangerous, stupid even. We are all fools, and we do it

only because we have to. It is about money, that's all."

### **The Inefficiency of Capitalist Globalization**

The captain invited me up to his quarters the following night and opened a bottle of Scotch whiskey. "Let me tell you a story," he began, "to explain what this business is all about."

It was like he was dictating his memoirs. It was like he was preparing his confession. I fumbled for my pencil, excited.

But his testimony was disappointing. It was just a straightforward story of the madness of globalization. "I was captain of a schooner taking cargo from Cork, Ireland—yes, your shitty country—to Brazil, another shitty country, and back again. We would load a cargo of livestock at Cobh and sail across the Atlantic, two weeks. There, in Brazil, the cattle would be slaughtered and made into canned meat. That's a Brazilian specialty—slaughterhouse skills, you know. I would load up the ship again with canned meat, and sail back to Ireland. The canned meat was sold in Irish supermarkets."

Silence.

"Is that it, Captain?"



"Yes."

"Yes, hmmm. Quite a story."

"Yes, appalling isn't it?"

"Yes."

## Like Falling Off the End of the World

Day by day the ocean got darker, and the clear blue sky became dotted with clouds. The temperature dropped subtly. We found ourselves wearing more layers of clothes each night on watch. A basking whale bade us farewell from tropical waters with a spectacular fountain of water and a graceful leap, crashing dramatically back into the ocean. Right out in the middle of the Atlantic, six days from Europe, we pass bobbing fishing boats from the Spanish fleet. Fish stocks are so depleted that fishermen have to go to extraordinary lengths to fill their quota. A day later we pass some discarded oil barrels bobbing about in the water—litter all over the world.

The excitement of heading toward the Caribbean and the exotic ports on that side of the Atlantic is directly proportional to the depression induced by heading toward cold, wintry north Atlantic waters. Rotterdam in winter never has the same alluring appeal as, say, tropical Paramaribo. Work on the deck is made more difficult by the rain and the cold and the increasingly choppy seas. Sure enough, a couple of days from port, just beyond the Azores, the

ship begins rolling long and deep, ten second rolls, on big North Atlantic swells. Sleeping or eating becomes an acrobatic chore, a balancing act against the forces of gravity. Traversing the passageways becomes a clown act, or the endeavors of a punch-drunk hobo in the park. And intermittently, the contents of your stomach will take a leap. Some people's visages take on a startling shade of blue. "Everybody gets sick, don't worry," the chief engineer tells me. "I've been getting sick for 25 years. Here, hold this, you'll feel better."

He places a potato in my hand. I feel better because I laugh for the first time all day.

The captain has the deckhands out in the winter gale painting and rusting, just to spite them. There's plenty of indoor work they could be doing, but he's in a rage because he got wind of a "party" below deck the previous night. "Drinking is prohibited on the boat," he thundered. Except for the officers who drink brandy every night in their fine staterooms, the fucking hypocrites.

I bring the toiling workers coffee on the deck, spilling most in the process, slipping and sliding on the treacherous swaying surface. The six men are fuming to be out in the gale; despite oilskins and rubber boots they are soaked through and miserable, chipping at the interminable rust. Manuel

thanks me for the coffee and finally exhibits some of the malevolent spirit of a seafaring motley crew. "That fucking captain better watch his step or he will have an accident," he mutters bitterly.

The 4AM-to-8AM watch is getting busy. As we approach Europe, our radar and the waters are becoming dotted with vessels—other cargo ships, fishing boats, coast guards, liners, and oil tankers. We are off autopilot and have to change course occasionally, as the second mate doesn't trust the navigation of the small fishing vessels. Nor does he trust the satellite navigator. Short of grabbing his sextant and shooting the stars, he prefers to keep a very close eye on procedures before him with his keen eyes.

"Ships go down every day and every night," he tells me. "Somewhere in the world right now a big ship is sinking. We hear SOSs all the time on the radio."

The captain comes in drinking his morning coffee and joins the conversation, uninvited.

"Like that yahoo of a yachtsman we found in the middle of the Atlantic lying half-dead in his little dinghy. We lost a whole afternoon rescuing that fool."

The captain would quite clearly have preferred to steam past the disabled vessel, but maritime etiquette requires that passing ships come to the rescue of vessels in distress.

"But the company received good press for that, Captain. We lost time,

but as the company director said, it was good for public relations." This from the second mate.

"We should have left that asshole in his tub to teach the other foolish yachtsmen a lesson. They are all jackass yahoos, forever causing problems for the merchant marine!" He changes the subject. "What is the weather forecast for today, Second Mate?"

"Bad," replies the second mate warily, "Strong winds, rain, the same as yesterday."

The captain has got up on the wrong side of the bed. "A good day for chipping rust on the starboard deck," he murmurs nastily, and leaves the bridge.

Even the second mate is provoked.

"He should have more respect for the crew," he says adroitly.

"It's true, but they just take it," I say, "they don't complain."

"No, they don't complain," says the second mate, peering intently out the bridge window.

We are approaching Rotterdam, and the weather is wretched, but we have made good time, twelve days and 21 hours. We have crossed six time zones, sailed 4,000 kilometers, used about 30 gallons of oil per kilometer, and got hundreds of thousands of banana bunches across the vast ocean, on time. The second mate calculates that the banana company



makes a good half-million dollars profit on the bananas. "What they pay for a small bunch of bananas off the shelf in Holland is about the same as a day's wages for the banana worker in Honduras."

"Second Mate!" I exclaim, shocked that the normally demure man would make such an overtly political statement. "You should keep your head down, do your work, and not consider these things that don't concern you!" I said sarcastically, mimicking his own words, his own mantra.

"Yes, you are quite right," he said, and smiled for the first time with an endearing air of complicity.

It's all over. We have docked in Rotterdam, the icy wind whips around the port and we are all wrapped tightly in many layers. The bananas are being unloaded with the latest state-of-the-art cranes; in no time at all the nicely ripened fruit will be whisking across Europe in articulated lorries. The port is cold, industrious, and sparsely populated. Europe's primary port has long been mechanized and the longshoremen downsized. It's like sailing into a cemetery, a place haunted by the ghosts of the generations of workers who have vacated the place in favor of great hulking machines and zippy conveyor belts. The luminous teeming of the Caribbean ports contrasts bleakly with this depressing vista. The only continuous element is the presence of armed guards.

I have to present myself to the captain one final time in order to sign off the ship. "Ah! The Irish scholar!" he exclaims mockingly, as I enter his cabin. "Don't desert us now! Surely there are many more stories to write here!"

And this is the thing about this stupid fuck of a captain: it's like he can see through you. He misses the essential part, but he gets most of it. I have a begrudging respect for him, his seaward ways and his blunt, overwhelming presence. Nevertheless, he has the capacity to undermine any goodwill I might feel toward him. He begins to get all maudlin and faux-philosophical.

"We are simple people, we sailors. We fight the oceans and we deliver the goods. But there is something that I want to say before you leave this ship that you should never forget."

This is interesting. There's nothing better than a good epiphany at the end of a long voyage. I'm all ears. The captain pulls at his beard and stares into space; I think I see the beginning of tears welling up in his cold eyes.

"Always remember that there is someone somewhere in the world who loves you."

I looked at him blankly, trying to comprehend his words. Was some wisdom hidden in there somewhere? The captain had a smug look on his face and held out his meaty paw to shake my hand.

What he said was completely absurd. Why would he bring up love now? Was he truly mad?

Love? This hulking metal monstrosity is possibly the most loveless, unhappy place I have ever had the misfortune of occupying in my whole life. Love and the *MV Suriname* is an unthinkable notion. Love and the transatlantic shipping industry do not go together. Love and bananas? No!

I shook the meaty paw and smiled at him as one smiles at a cop who has handed you back your false ID.

"Yeah, thanks."

## The Ongoing Search for the Revolutionary Atlantic

I sauntered off the loveless *MV Suriname* a happy man, a freed man, one who would not walk up this gangway again. I thought of the captain and the European officer class and their sad superannuated ways and the antiquated maritime class structure. I thought about the endless slog of useless labor, the unromantic characters that populated the ship, the brow-beaten crew, and the absence of resistance. I thought about prisons, and spaces without women, and Camus's line: "A place without women is a place without air to breathe."

But the last word was with the motley crew. As we shared a final beer approaching Rotterdam, my Filipino mate Manuel

had told me a real secret of the deep sea. "You ask us why we don't react to all the shit the captain gives us?" said Manuel. "I will tell you why we smile each time he orders us around. We smile because behind that bravado we know he is scared."

Then he told me a story that represented either a powerful psychological threat against the captain or a pathetic rationalization of the crew's acceptance of his abuse toward them.

Some time ago, on another ship of this line, there was an accident. Apparently there was a German captain like ours, a bad man, who mis-

treated his crew. And there was a Filipino crew, like this one, quiet, minding their own business. Far out in the Atlantic, the captain went for a stroll around the forward deck. The night was dark, and the waves were pounding the ship. Nobody heard his screams, and the body was never found.



GRAFFITI PHOTO ZOE NOE

# STARRING MR. GREEN, IN THE LAUNDRY ROOM, WITH THE KNIFE

by dontchuwannaknow

I AM THE ONE WHO RELEASES YOUR DISABILITY CHECK EVERY TWO WEEKS. I am the one who decides if we should send out the company spies to see if you are installing a new subwoofer in your '67 Impala, or if you are on a dolly underneath your boat tightening screws, and then fastening your neck brace as you leave for your doctor's appointment. Not to mention that I, in my early 20s, fresh out of college with no workers comp experience, no 40-hours-a-week work experience even, will make a decision either to let you go to the doctor you want, or to send you to a doctor I know nothing about simply because our company has a contract with a different company, which means donuts on Fridays, new pens, calendars, and magnets. We play detective, doctor, broker, shrink, doormat, prescription drug dealer, god, hooky—the list goes on. They should never have hired me.

Did I mention that workers compensation will go down in history as the last feeble attempt at playing "Democracy" before the dark clouds of Empire smudge out the sun and the earth opens up and swallows us whole? Don't have health insurance because it costs half your paycheck? Can't afford it because you don't have a living wage, you pay \$1,000 for a closet in the city, and you work twelve hours a day, six days a week?

Well, all you have to do is go to the unemployment line and wait for someone to ask you if you were hurt on the job. Say yes, and you will be escorted through the entire web of underground workings of workers comp fraud. Doctors who make up your ailments on the spot will file a claim with your employer and their insurance company. Then the claim will fall into the hands of an overworked, inexperienced claims adjuster (OICA, in this case me), who will notice your claim only when you start annoying me with doctors' reports that say "stay off of work until next visit," and you only have a laceration on your pinky finger (fancy word for cut). If you're lucky the OICA will bury the claim under towering piles of paper while you sit on your ass collecting checks. But just hope you get an adjuster like me. If you get the wrong one, they'll be on you like flies on shit, filming you cheat on your wife, noticing that your hernia seems to have healed fine six months ago; then off to court you go. By the time your wife finds out, prison won't look so bad.

I soon found out that I was not cut out to be a good claims adjuster. I suspected fraud in one case. The claim started to irritate me. The claimant kept going back to the doctor and staying off work, but the doctor didn't know what was wrong with her, nor were they trying to find out. I couldn't tell who was behind the curtain calling the shots.

So I sent the company spies out to video her. The results

were quite interesting. Here I was in an office hundreds of miles away, looking at close-ups of her setting up picnic tables, picking up water coolers, and chasing balloons at her nephew's

birthday party in the park, while "suffering from major back pain." This was all the evidence I needed to report her to the fraud department as required by law. Plus, I might get a promotion, or at least a huge slap on the back from all the corn-fed, loud-mouthed, big American types in the office, and possibly new friends for "happy hour." Wow, the possibilities.

But really, I sat quietly at my desk, feeling nauseous. I had never pursued a case this far before. See, the unexpected factor in the equation is that I *felt* for her. I related to this woman who wanted to have a break from the grind. She wanted to have her life back, and like all of us, probably wanted to work hard at something she enjoyed and was interested in. From the conversations I had with her, she was not interested in tucking in someone else's sheets at a hotel and cleaning up after their privilege. She was a woman of color who wanted a vacation from her racist, sexist, patronizing boss (I know because I was on the phone with him all the time). I was not going to be the snitch. I do not think people should go to jail for being creative in trying to survive in our capitalist economy. It is a different story if you are orchestrating the workings of the Empire—that is the real crime to me. But this girl was just trying to get a break, and I felt for her. So, to make a long story short, I did not report her to the Feds. I tucked the videotape back into the folder, and after a few weeks I convinced her to go to a different doctor, who immediately put her back to work, and all of a sudden she was well again! Miracle.

There are many miracles in workers compensation.

• • •

Scene takes place in a stuffy cubicked industrial office space. The cubicle walls are short so if you stand up everyone can see you. Only real friend in the office who you can tell everything to sneaks over to take a break at your desk. You interrupt her with your question.

"Hey Jae, you didn't hear me yelling from across the room, did you?" She nods no.

"Well I was yelling at this employer who was trying to tell

me how to do my job. He was mad that his employee was not back at work yet. I'm thinking, 'He just had hernia surgery, and you want him back lifting 100-pound boxes? He's gonna be busting loose again.' And the boss was saying some shit like 'I really respect my guys here, they've been working for me for ten years now, I treat them like familia.' None of the guys there speak English—boss is from Gringolandia, and he acts like he hosts dinner parties with their families at his house—while they're getting paid minimum wage. Ten years? They've been working for you for ten years and you're paying them minimum wage? Plus he's a grade-A asshole, talks down to me, and calls me 'honey' on the phone."

Boss walks by and I pretend that I'm teaching my friend how to pull up something on the computer. We both become completely absorbed in whatever crap is on the screen, carefully sculpted concerned eyebrows. I continued. "But dang, it's harder to regulate on the company employers because our boss

cares what they think. But you know how I am, if someone says something hella wrong, I believe in community accountability and all that shit, I'll let them know what they did wrong."

"Girl, that sounds rough," she replied. "Well, I just left my desk for lunch and when I came back I checked my messages and the lady said in her computer voice, 'you have 32 messages.' And earlier I was taking a quick mental break, reading a news article for three minutes at my desk, when 'the hawk' came by and cast his shadow over me. You know, in his passive-aggressive way. Then he says, 'Uh, you know you're not supposed to be doing that.'"

I was thinking, 'Uh, well why not motherfucker?' Like they own every single second of our time at work. They try to run it like a sweatshop, I'm saying that I do good work and that's what you are paying me for.

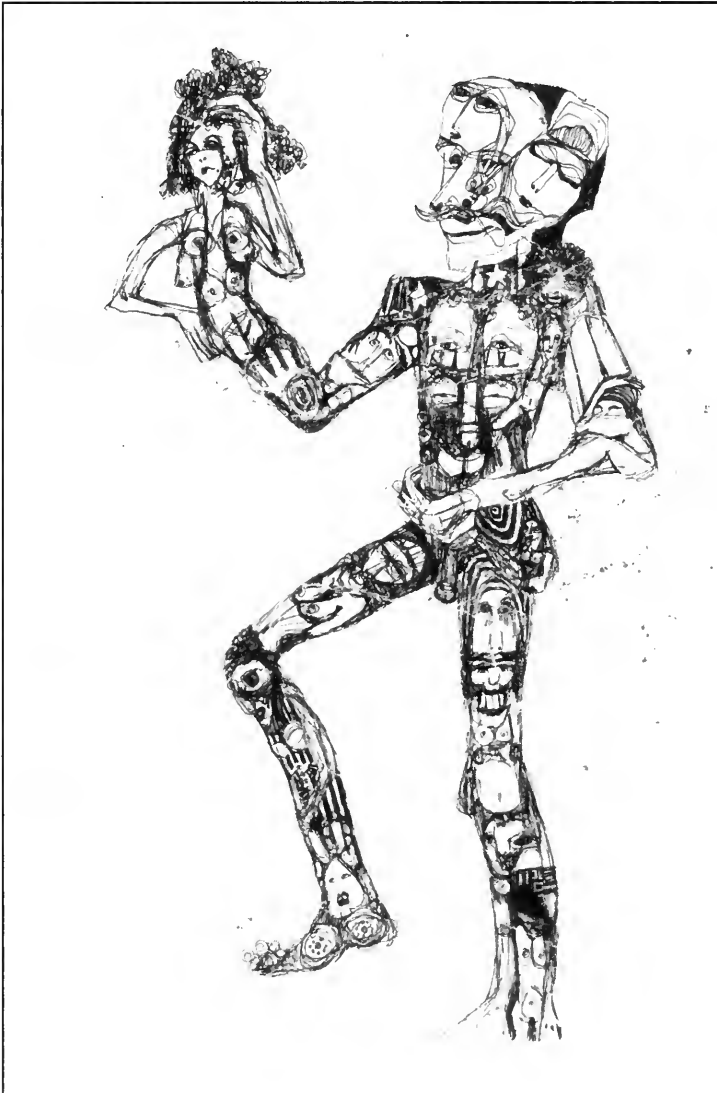
"And remember before, I got that phone call for an art commission (I have a life you know). I took the call at Sarah's desk on my cell phone, and so what, I was talking on it for a second. Boss comes over and I think that he's waiting for Sarah to tell her something. So I leave her desk, still on the phone, and walk over to my desk. Mind you, I'm not disturbing anyone, I'm just handling something for a second. I work hard at this job and do my work well. And he follows me all the way to my desk. At this point I happen to be finishing my conversation, so I wrap it up at my leisure and hang up.

"Uh, what was that about?" he asks. 'I was on the phone.' (Duh.) 'Uh, well, this is work hours.' 'Well um, other people have cell phones here, their human connections call them every now and then, kids, family, whoever. It's okay to pick it up, handle your business for a few seconds, and then get back to work. That's all I did. You know, we have lives outside of work and we always do our job just fine.'

"Girl, I really said that, and he didn't know what to say. You know, that passive-aggressive shit. And so he walked away. But I really don't give a fuck, what are they going to do, fire us? They need us, we are juggling at least 150 claims. They can barely get people to stick around long enough to handle the entire life of a claim. This place is weird. But man, the other units, like downstairs, you know what they be going through. I know because I used to work there, they count the minutes you're in the bathroom. No joke. Anyway, I gotta get back to work. Walk back like normal. I'll see you at lunch. Take it Easy."

...

The ten realities and rules of workers com-



GRAPHIC BY MARI TEPPER

pensation:

1. Celebrate those birthdays! And those promotions, and those last days before someone leaves the office, and every holiday, and that company spirit, and especially those Fridays! Supply a cake every time, and inquire into company lunch. If you don't get that, at least you can have an hour lunch.
2. Never date anyone in the office. After you realize their mama still folds their laundry and they think that Colin Powell sure is a good role model for young African-Americans, you will have to see them everyday and be reminded of this.
3. Take long breaks, eat during work time, leave the office to do errands during your lunch to push a little closer to your dreams, one step closer to being able to quit your job.
4. Send perverted emails to co-workers to pass the time. Laugh when you pass their desk and make a quick gesture to reference the joke.
5. Talk on the phone all the time, and when the boss passes by say "Uh, yes, I see, well, we'll just have to send him to Oak Valley Medical and get him back to work as soon as possible because...yu no blah blah yeah oh kay..." Fade out as the boss leaves, "Anyway, gurl..."
6. Have your "herbal remedies" in moderation every morning to morph your cubicle into a wild jungle of paper mountain ranges; your boss's voice turns into a meaningless buzzing noise that you squash with your foot; your co-workers become main characters in the new sitcom you are planning in your head.
7. Learn to speak in coded languages; sign language is a good one to start out with during meetings.
8. Make friends with the computer tech. 'Nuff said.
9. Smoke in moderation. This is the most important bond-

ing that takes place with your co-workers. The smokers have an entire network of bumming cigarettes, inside jokes, gossip you probably don't want to know, and shit-talking, like "Yo, I can't take this shit-hole any longer, I'm gonna quit tomorrow." Also, if you are known as a smoker, you automatically become entitled to hourly breaks. Plus you can see who your co-workers are going out to lunch with, and then you can trade gossip for cigarettes!

10. Your work is never done. You can never be "caught up." You are either "not drowning" or in "crisis mode."

...

Below is a create-your-own-drama game called "You Could Be Next!" This game helps you imagine what your future work injury might be and the cause of your demise. These choices are all real options in the computer program. Please choose one selection from each category to complete your story, e.g. Nervous Disorder—Allergies—Animal, wild, vermin—Lungs

Don't forget, it's work-related. So this person's case might be that they have a nervous disorder from allergy attacks that comes from rats or mice that live in the building where they work, and it primarily affects their lungs.

These are just a few of the many possibilities. Don't forget, you can have multiple injuries—strained neck, back, upper and lower arms, pain in lower back, tendonitis in both wrists and forearms, nausea, stress—especially if you have a lawyer!

But hey, maybe having your leg broken is better than checking in your soul at the door every time you go to work. At least at my job, it's the only way to get a decent vacation. And just to make it clear, just because you enjoy your workers-comp-sponsored vacation doesn't mean that your leg does not really hurt. You just have your priorities straight. Shit, live your life.

PW

NATURE OF INJURY	INJURY CAUSE	INCIDENT TYPE	BODY PART
nervous disorder	allergies	animal, wild vermin	lungs
asphyxiation	crushed between	electric equipment	facial tissue
fracture	cut/puncture, power tool	objects handled	wrist
eye injury	scald/hot grease	hot liquid	right eye
bite, human	misconduct of others	heavy person	head, scalp
amputation, partial	caught between	escalator	hand, right
insect bite	cumulative	machinery	groin
disease, contagious	burn or scald	strain using tool	skull
harassment	crushed between machinery	broken glass	eyes, both
hernia	fall, slip into excavation, hole	cement	back, lower
poisoning	bite, human	frozen pipe rupture	finger
amputation	eye injury from grinding or chopping	grease or oil	
asphyxiation		emotional distress	

# TRAUMA TANGO

Tom Messmer

“The apocalypse has been announced so many times that it cannot occur. And even if it did it would be hard to distinguish it from the everyday fate already reserved for individual and community alike.”

RAOUL VANEIGEM, *THE MOVEMENT OF THE FREE SPIRIT*

“They hang the man and flog the woman  
who steal the goose from off the common  
But let the greater villain loose  
who steals the common from the goose”

ENGLISH FOLK POEM, 17TH CENTURY

1. I'm outside waiting for an ambulance to bring in another trauma. It's one of those foggy-yet-sunny, surreal San Francisco afternoons that occur in the fall, which is actually somehow our summer. I noticed a few pigeons congregating to my left and as I glanced over I realized to my horror that they were all happily dining on human blood and tissue from an ambulance backboard.
2. The budget crisis in San Francisco has become truly dire, and according to the folks who calculate such things, sacrifices are in order. What amounts to a 7.5% pay decrease is proposed for many who work for the city in such job capacities as health aides, janitors, groundskeepers, and, in my case, social workers. The union puts this proposal to a vote and it narrowly passes. For some reason the union was unprepared to propose any alternative to this pay cut for the lowest-paid workers in the city. And the membership was frightened by the prospect of layoffs: many have recently bought homes in the Bay Area and are deeply in debt. Still, many are pissed about this, particularly since a large pay increase simultaneously came through for the city supervisors.
3. A man jumped off a freeway overpass and fell 740 feet onto the roadway. He was quite dead, but they attempted to revive him as a matter of course. I walked into the trauma room after they officially pronounced him dead, the floor was covered with blood and bloody footprints, he was partially covered with a sheet. Medical staff stood about quietly filling out paperwork. For some reason someone was pumping music throughout the hospital's PA system and the Temptations' "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" was blaring in the room. I went back into the room a few minutes later and they were playing Aretha's "Natural Woman" and a nurse was actually singing and dancing to the music.
4. The pay decrease got to me, and I thought to myself, "Someone ought to do something." Then it occurred to me that this in of itself isn't a particularly helpful sentiment. Terry Pratchett quipped that this thought is never followed up with the rider "and that someone is me." I'd been reading Saul Alinsky for some odd reason and I decide I want to rile people up, so I distribute flyers and petitions slamming the union for not fighting, and demanding action. I get a bunch of signatures and people call the Union griping, so they contact me and set up a meeting about what to do.
5. A homeless Haight Street kid maybe 17 years old is brought in by the police. His friends were worried about him because he had what looked like burns all over his body. The police didn't like the way he looked so they brought him down. He has a pretty high fever and he tells me he thinks he fell asleep in the sun or something. The docs are puzzled and wonder if maybe a speed lab blew up on him. I talk with him a while and he tells me he ran away from home, which was a trailer park somewhere in the Midwest. He has one of those squatter symbols badly tattooed on his arm. He's quite frightened and tells me he really wants to get into a drug treatment program so I agree to help him once he's better. I take my half-hour regulation dinner and when I come back the room he is in is packed with doctors and he has a breathing tube in. They don't know what's wrong with him but it appears he is suffering from some sort of systemic sepsis. He dies that night of complications from necrotizing fasciitis, aka "flesh-eating bacteria", which he got from a dirty needle.
6. I meet with the rep and some other activists on the very day Schwarzenegger is elected governor. They all have stunned, tired expressions on their faces and have been precinct-walking and rushing from meeting to meeting for years, probably. With a sinking heart I imagine myself clutching a tattered datebook, or even a palm pilot packed full of meetings and rallies, public forums, and phone banking. This is unattractive to me in the extreme and I decide to play music and spend time with my fiancé instead.
7. I receive a subpoena from a lawyer about a case I worked on in which a 2-year-old Latino child was injured in her apartment in the Mission district. The family is suing the landlord and the landlord's lawyer tells me that the kid is



really OK and that the family is trying to take advantage of his client, an “honest, hard-working landlord” who happens to live in the wealthy Marina district. I tell him that I can’t recall a single fact from the case, but that I’ve lived in those Mission tenements and that none of my landlords tended to the buildings very well. For some reason they don’t call me to testify.

8. I’m speaking to a homeless man who is what is referred to as a “frequent flyer”. He is in the ER at least 3 times a week, mostly for alcohol intoxication or being the victim of an assault. Between the alcohol and blunt head trauma he has become profoundly demented, and his mental capacity is about that of a ten year old, with a short-term memory that lasts 5 minutes. If I find him a shelter bed and ask him to wait for the van to come pick him up and bring him down there he will either a) wander off and get drunk; b) go back to the triage window and re-register, forgetting that he’s already been seen (interestingly, if a shift has changed recently, oftentimes the triage nurses won’t notice that he’s left the hospital); or c) sit in the chair all night staring at the television. There is not one, or two, but a dozen or more people like this who come to the ER regularly.
9. One of my favorite websites is called The Commoner (<http://www.commoner.org.uk>), a commie website which recently featured a discussion of the ancient notion of “The Commons.” It occurs to me that health and caring for others’ bodies must be part of this. If it isn’t, what could be? The Commons are simply those things that ought not to be part of the marketplace. In the United States in 2004 this concept is viewed by some as close to treason, and by most with suspicion. We seem to have learned our lessons well, though if I suggest to one of the hospital police officers that his job may some day be privatized, indeed that it almost certainly will be, he scoffs. Could the sort of sentimentality Americans reserve for police and fire fighters be enough to stave off another Enclosure, or will we return to the days where the rich have private security and fire fighters and everyone else has what they happen to be able to pay for? Will the poor have to rely on bucket brigades?
10. A rapacious local “public” university that is also somehow a famous private research hospital system is increasingly involved in the operations of the hospital where I work. One proposal calls for a relocation of the entire hospital to the area that included Mission Rock, a former hellhole of a homeless shelter where murder, extortion, drug dealing, and pimping were everyday occurrences. It is common knowledge that the move is being driven in part by top-tier physicians who complain of parking problems

at the current facility. This hospital has recently proposed a new initiative in their world-famous cardiology program in which wealthy donors could gain “enhanced access” to same-day appointments, house calls(!), a special hotline, even physicians’ private pager numbers in case of emergency. These donors include the elite of our society, CEOs of major corporations, national political figures, the usual suspects. This boutique medical system may be the wave of the future, despite local outcry, even from the physicians forced to play a part in it.

11. I’m waiting at the ambulance bay for another trauma to come in. As the ambulance pulls up and the EMTs open the door I find myself looking into the eyes of a dead black teenager from some particularly violent local projects. He has a bullet hole directly in the middle of his forehead. I can feel myself about to faint as my stomach is empty and the shock hits me hard. I grab something quick to eat and wait for the crowd of family and friends to arrive. As a social worker I earn my pay by somehow offering comfort and assistance in situations exactly like this. But what can one say? I do a lot of listening and nodding; sometimes I’ve broken down and cried with people, not your stereotypical civil servant response. I’m paid to maintain a human presence in the midst of real horror. I ask myself what kind of system we have created that requires us to pay someone to remain human.
12. I’m walking through the ER on my rounds and realize that just about every bed is occupied by someone who has actually been admitted to the hospital but is simply parked in the ER waiting for a bed to become available upstairs. There are so many sick people out in the community not getting regular medical care that many come to the ER as a last resort, and when they do they are often very ill and in need of hospitalization. Many of these folks are there with such preventable diseases as diabetes and heart and lung diseases from smoking. The deep love affair our society has with privatization, and the equally deep denial that the market’s hand is neither invisible nor particularly benign, are nowhere more obvious than in an emergency room in the year 2004.
13. Despite my ambivalence towards the union, I’ll do what I can to help when the fight comes, if for nothing other than solidarity with the people I work with everyday who tend to the sick, the crazy, the suicides, the junkies and drunks, and the ever-growing numbers of those who are working but uninsured that wind up jammed into the waiting room, staring up with glazed, sick expressions at reality programs on the ceiling-mounted television.

PW

# EVERYDAY TERROR

## THE NATIONAL INSECURITY STATE

Adam Cornford

RECENT POLL NUMBERS MAKE VISIBLE what most of us have known for some time—that ordinary working Americans are a lot less scared of what foreign terrorists might do to them than of what daily life is already doing. Such fear, combined with what *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart calls a “visceral loathing” for the Bush regime, may reach the point at which it’s replaced by an (actually elected) Kerry Democratic administration. But this by itself will not change the underlying causes of the constant intimidation to which most Americans are subjected by the corporate elite and its allies and servants in government and the media.

### Economic Terror

The greatest single cause of fear in most people’s lives is the economy. America has lost over three million jobs in the last four years, mostly in manufacturing, and mostly above the median wage. We are facing the highest levels of unemployment since the engineered recession of the early Reagan era—the last time this kind of terror was deliberately applied. To be fair, some of the jobs are disappearing simply due to competition from locally owned firms in low-wage zones such as Mexico, China, and the Philippines. But many others are being exported to these same low-wage zones by U.S.-based corporations. The Bush administration has only accelerated the continuation of this process, already well under way during the Clinton era, as prosperity fueled by the stock market bubble masked some of the effects of this shift. And while John Kerry huffs and puffs about “Benedict Arnold” corporations that export high-wage jobs, he has no real proposals for stopping the process, which is integral to the WTO-NAFTA-CAFTA version of globalization.

Meanwhile, the Federal government continues to put new terror weapons in the hands of corporations: importing engineers and other skilled technical workers from South Asia, and Bush’s Guest Worker bill that would “legalize” undocumented workers on temporary visas as virtual indentured slaves to their employers, are only two examples.

But again, the backdrop to this is the continual weakening, ever since 1948 and the Taft-Hartley Act and much intensified since 1980, of legal protections for workers, particularly of the right to organize, let alone the right to strike. At this point the NLRB is a stacked deck, even with—as during the Clinton years—a somewhat friendlier team in charge of the bureaucracy. The AFL-CIO and Congressional Democrats are pushing a bill that will replace the union election—which

allows employers lots of time to intimidate, bribe, and divide their workforce to prevent a “yes” vote—with the much quicker “card check” as the primary means of gaining union recognition. While this would probably help, workers still need on-the-job leverage to force employers into a decent contract, and given that most jobs are now exportable, this is hard to do without much greater national and international coordination among workers in an industry.

It’s not only that an ever-increasing proportion of America’s workers face job insecurity: new jobs laid-off workers are likely to get will typically pay less and have inferior benefits and conditions. Meanwhile, even workers with relatively well-paid and secure jobs—the UFCW grocery clerks, for instance—are facing brutal employer pressure to cut their health benefits. (see also “A State By Any Other Name” on page 24.) Corporations prefer a high level of unemployment because it enforces what economists like to call “market discipline,” that is, it scares workers into tolerating the intolerable. The kind of life described by Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*—working one-and-a-half or even two full-time jobs, neither of which pays much above a shriveled minimum wage, just to get by—is becoming the norm for the bottom third of the workforce. To chronic fear are added chronic stress, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, and, for an increasing number, malnutrition, caused less by a shortage of food than by a shortage of time to prepare anything wholesome for oneself and one’s family.

It seems likely that the rapid growth of obesity as a major cause of illness and death in the U.S., along with rising rates of infant mortality and declining average height (adjusted for ethnic background) are all symptomatic of this state of affairs. So, I suspect, are such cultural phenomena as the wholly irrational surge in popularity of gas-guzzling SUVs, which are less safe than smaller cars but make their owners feel safer, the bloating of portions in chain restaurants, the rise of evangelical “mega-churches,” and the general tendency to simple-minded escapism in entertainment. Even George W. Bush’s stubborn popularity with nearly half the voting population, in the face of ever-mounting evidence of corruption, fraud, and malevolent

incompetence, is, I would argue, fundamentally about fear and the wish not to think and act for oneself. Bush's crude division of the world into good and evil forces, his macho pretence of decisiveness and strength in the face of "our enemies," are pacifiers in the mouths of people infantilized by chronic anxiety overlaid on authoritarian conditioning.

Meanwhile, the lack of decent health insurance—or any at all—for more than 40 million Americans is another major source of economic terror. With little or no coverage for catastrophic hospital care, millions of Americans live in dread of serious or chronic illness. Workers accept ever-increasing premiums and co-pays imposed by employers because they're afraid of ending up in a worse situation, possibly with no insurance at all. (Wal-Mart is but one model in the post-Reagan US economy. Let us pause here to spit on the Gipper's grave; Alzheimer's let him off too easily.) This warms the hearts of the insurers, just as the Bush administration's new Medicare bill banning the cross-border sale of cheaper drugs from Canada, puts smiles on the faces of pharmaceutical executives. A steady flow of money from these interests into state and federal politics, as well as into media campaigns, keeps the idea of Western Europe- and Canadian-style tax-funded, universal, national health insurance beyond serious discussion. The Clintons' disastrous, labyrinthine attempt at an impossible compromise between for-profit insurance and the need for universal coverage, which helped Newt Gingrich and Co. gain control of Congress in 1994, has ever since intimidated all but a few politicians out of any attempt to propose serious reform. Kerry's current proposal is little better, though it does at least advance the notion that health care is a right, not a privilege.

If illness is scary, retirement is nerve-wracking. Countless workers have already lost much of their retirement money through irresponsible investing by their pension, 401(k), and mutual fund managers during the '90s bubble. Meanwhile, although contrary to alarmist propaganda from right-wing pundits, Social Security is still solvent, the Bush strategy of starving the Federal government of funds via tax cuts and overspending is designed to force the system into privatization. This would release a huge flow of capital into the coffers of investment banks and insurance companies, but leave nearly all the rest of us vulnerable to market fluctuations in the assets upon which we will depend in our old age.

In fact, this effort to force the looting of Social Security is once again merely a continuation of the fundamental strategy of the corporate Right. This strategy was propagated during Reagan's first term by the front group Americans for Tax Reform, and famously summarized by its current leader, Gingrich/Bush advisor, anti-tax ideologue, and Grateful Dead fan Grover Norquist: "...to get [government] down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub." Of course, this faction, which dominates the Bush regime, does not really wish to eliminate government. On the contrary, there are parts of the government that it is expanding as rapidly as possible—

notably the military, the intelligence services, and aggressive/repressive functions generally, and tax and legislative support for corporations. What these swine really mean by "government" is all the things it does to aid the poor, sick, elderly, and infirm, and to defend the interests of individuals and civil organizations such as unions and social welfare, environmental, and consumer groups as opposed to corporations. Once again, I am not suggesting that a Kerry administration would reverse all these trends anywhere near aggressively enough—only that it represents a more farsighted coalition of elite forces, which recognizes the dangers of runaway federal deficits, mass poverty, elimination of the stably employed working class, and global warming.

## Social Terror

Americans are also experiencing higher social and familial anxiety, much of which can be directly traced to the defunding of public services over the last two decades (again, big props to the grinning ghost of Ronald Reagan for this one, as also to the withered specters of Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann, authors of California's Prop 13). Most states now face severe deficits as a result of the Bush administration's massive cuts in grants for health, welfare, education, and transportation on top of the steady erosion of their tax revenues caused by decades of pressure from corporations, real-estate interests, and upper-middle-class homeowners. In fact, all 50 states are at least



technically bankrupt. This particularly pernicious general fiscal starvation of local and regional government has been renewed by the Christian-Right-led attack on programs dealing with HIV, drug issues, and sexuality and reproductive rights.

The results are visible everywhere: decaying public schools with demoralized, underpaid teachers; skyrocketing college tuition alongside mostly flat financial aid; mass transit that goes fewer places, less often, for higher fares; a public health system on the verge of collapse.

Working parents face a host of worries about their children: how they'll get to school on time, how they'll obtain a good education, and how safe they'll be. (That said, recent parent surveys suggest a curiously schizoid, presumably denial-fueled attitude to public education, which boils down to: the schools in general are totally screwed up, but my kid's school is OK.) How they'll pay for college, assuming they can get into college on the test scores they're able to generate after the patchy schooling they've had; how they'll keep from abusing alcohol and drugs, contracting HIV, or getting pregnant!—and how they'll get treatment or an abortion if they do!.. No wonder suicide is the second largest cause of death among teenagers after car accidents, no wonder divorce rates are so high, and no wonder the market for antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs is booming.

In addition to these entirely realistic worries, there is a curious, semi-illusory dimension to the social terror campaign—the issue of crime. Throughout the last seven or eight years of the twentieth century and into this one, crime rates were actually dropping even as anxiety about crime was rising, fueled by media hysteria and right-wing ideologues. The Right attributed this drop to the ever-longer sentences, many of them mandatory, being handed down even for nonviolent felonies, such as the sale or possession of crack cocaine, and especially to the “three strikes” laws enacted in so many states during that period. Studies, however, have shown that the drop is not mainly attributable to tough sentences and tougher prisons; in fact, these sentences and prisons are creating an increasingly larger pool of recidivistic, violent sociopaths—and also prison mega-gangs, of which the Aryan Brotherhood is only the most brutal, that have not only spread, along with AIDS and TB, through the entire American gulag but are busy building criminal empires on the outside. The “justice” system is a self-replicating social terror machine.

### Political Terror

Finally, Americans face direct and indirect political intimidation. In the years since 9/11, it has been difficult to voice any serious criticism of the Bush administration for fear of being labeled a traitor. From the very day of the Al Qaeda atrocities, a concerted government and media campaign set out to exploit them for political purposes. (The curious unconcern



TODD SANCHONI

of Bush and his top aides on the day of the attacks, as well as such mysteries as the failure of the Air Force to scramble together assault aircraft once the airliners were known to be missing, is finally, with the huge success of *Fahrenheit 911*, getting more attention.) The ensuing PATRIOT Act of 2001 has authorized a host of repressive measures, including the virtual suspension of privacy rights, and allows the Attorney General to define “terrorist” and “terrorist support” organizations more or less at will.

One of the more stunning bits of chutzpah on the part of the Bush regime has been its appointment to high-level posts of several indicted or convicted “Iran-Contra” felons. Among these, former Reagan National Security advisor Adm. John Poindexter stands out not only for his role as primary architect of the Iran-Contra scheme but for his directorship of the post-2001 Office of Information Awareness (OIA). OIA’s goal is nothing less than to create a vast Internet and telecom surveillance system, originally named Total Information Awareness and halted by Congress in 2003, but now being stealthily pursued piecemeal. TIA would allow not only a sophisticated computer analysis of the immensely widening wiretapping authorized by PATRIOT, but would also facilitate mining of internet traffic and of the immense virtual database created by the linkage of transaction records and other personal information via an individual’s driver’s license and Social Security number. All this, of course, in the name of combating terrorism. If you’re not terrorized by this deep invasion of privacy, you should be.

As dissent beyond the timidly ineffectual is increasingly tarred with the “terrorist” brush, so protest is treated with much greater brutality by the police, as seen in the violence dealt out last year to antiwar protesters and longshore workers in Oakland and to global justice demonstrators in Miami. In this climate, it has been much easier for the Republican leadership to continue its campaign of gerrymandering (as in Texas), vote-rigging (as in Florida), and demagoguery (as in the California Governor recall).

## Isolation versus Solidarity

The corporate elite is able to impose this regime of fear not only because a mere 13 percent of the U.S. workforce (mostly in the public sector, at that) belongs to any kind of union and the already biased framework of labor law is consistently enforced against organizing efforts, but for another, deeper reason.

Until the middle of the last century, workers for a given enterprise or industry, such as the New York garment district, tended to live close together and close to the workplace, in tenements or row houses. They had strong social networks and practiced mutual aid out of necessity. Union organizing, despite an even more hostile legal situation, was easier because workers knew and supported each other outside of work.

But today's employees seldom live near each other or their extended families, and forfeit hours of their unpaid, "free" time commuting to work from scattered suburban homes. Despite the phone and the Internet, this makes the logistics of organizing much harder. More profoundly, it creates isolation, rendering us (and I do mean us, as in you and me, dear reader of this sophisticated publication, not just "them"—do you really think you're immune?) vulnerable to the dizzying stream of pro-business, pro-privatization propaganda pouring from our radios and TV sets. It reinforces the constant theme in American culture, propagated relentlessly for the last quarter-century by right-wing foundations and think tanks, that we are all entrepreneurs competing in the great marketplace, pitching our skills and personalities as merchandise to the highest bidder. If we find ourselves poor, broke, sick, or unemployed, it's nobody's fault but our own. Life is a race, and we're the losers—end of story. (Still don't like the "we"? When was the last time you called someone a "loser"? Aren't you engaged in this competition in some way?)

The first step in overcoming fear, then, is overcoming the *shame* we feel at what seem our own failures. Of course we may have made mistakes, but the economic and social conditions that have been imposed on us make the consequences of otherwise minor errors potentially deadly. It's as if the force of gravity has been doubled, so that even a small fall breaks bones.

Once we recognize that mil-

lions of other people, including some of our neighbors, face the same terrifying conditions we face, we can take the next step, moving to overcome isolation. If we're lucky enough to belong to a decent union—one that actually, unlike many unions, does provide real collective as well as individual defense for its members—that's obviously the first stop. But other grassroots groups, from patients' rights and tenants'

organizations to neighborhood groups, can also provide short-term support. Sometimes it's just our friends who save us. But the first thing is to get past trying to face it alone.

Beyond the immediate crisis, the key to rolling back the everyday terror we face is *solidarity*. Solidarity is based on trust, a trust built face-to-face, in small groups, out of dialogue and shared experi-

ence. Each time our trust is rewarded, we grow stronger as individuals and as a group. We begin to believe that if we stumble, others will help us to our feet again, as we will help them. At the same time, we are reinforced in our understanding that the source of our worst problems and most excruciating fears is the existing political, social, and economic system—a system designed to benefit the few at the expense of the many and to terrorize the many into passively accepting it.

## Survival as Terror

This is the crucial point. All rhetoric of freedom and opportunity to the contrary, capitalism has always been based on fear. Yes, ambition, for one's children if not for oneself, has been an important motivator, too, in keeping countless people working at mind-numbing, soul-killing, often body-breaking jobs year in, year out, until they die or are "retired." But ultimately, for most people most of the time, it boils down to what John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, told his people: "He that does not work, neither shall he eat." This has always been the first law of capitalism for the worker. During the long postwar boom

of (roughly) 1948-1972, it was possible to live without much economic fear in the "developed" countries because jobs that paid enough to live on were so plentiful, and beneath them was the social safety net developed since the end of the Depression. The result by the late '60s was a wholesale "revolt against work" not only by the so-called hippies but by millions of working-class youth. And



this revolt, even when expressed individually, as it was more often than not, was part of a collective culture of refusal, expressed in various more visible social movements—the peace movement, the black and Chicano movements, the women's and gay rights movements. An essential aspect of the economic crisis of the later '70s was the reimposition of labor market terror on younger workers via inflation and recession combined. This reimposition has continued ever since.

The worst of it is this. When John Winthrop made his pronouncement, the productivity of labor was so low and the social group so small that it was indeed a necessity. But even by the late nineteenth century, productivity had been so multiplied by technology that Paul Lafargue, in his pamphlet *The Right to Be Lazy*, could contemplate the possibility of a four-hour workday. More than a century later, most work in developed countries is now of two kinds, neither of which would be needed in a system built on people's needs for enjoyment, creativity, and freedom. One kind of work is making sure capital circulates—marketing and selling merchandise; collecting, routing, storing, and tracking the money the sales generate; and so forth. The other is providing other workers with the services they can no longer perform for themselves and each other because of the time they must sacrifice to job, commute, and, increasingly, the “work” of shopping in warehouse stores—fast food, home and auto maintenance and repair, most “entertainment.” In other words, all this constant stress and fear and exhaustion, and the meaninglessness of most work, are both utterly unnecessary. Except that the lie-soaked, violence-backed power of the existing order forces each of us, individually, to reproduce it by what we do every day.

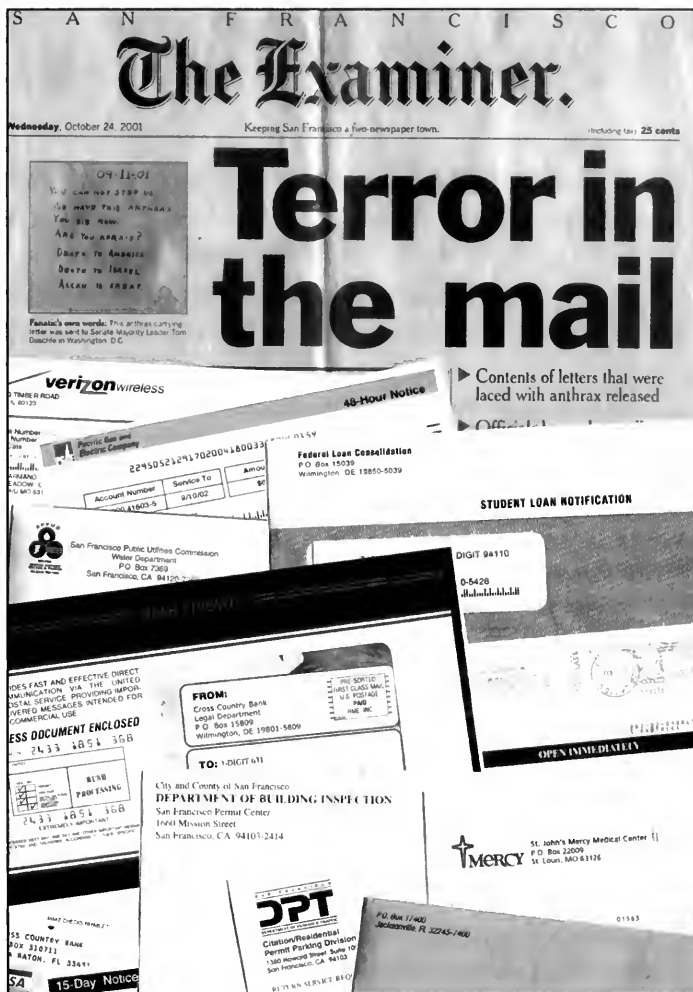
## From Solidarity to Freedom

This understanding is itself terrifying because of the scale of the task with which it confronts us. It's also exhilarating, because the glowing, toxic clouds of pro-business propaganda and private-individualist ideology begin to clear and we can see where we are. But solidarity also shows us something more. Over and over again during the last century and a half, workers collectively resisting the system that exploits and terrorizes them have come to understand that solidarity is not just a means, but an end in itself—the basis for a new and better kind of society. Rapidly expanding grassroots communication, face-to-face direct decision-making, ad hoc organization of mutual aid in forms like emergency food distribution centers, strike kitchens and clinics, and in some cases actual takeover of workplaces and transport systems—all these aspects of large-scale solidarity begin, in the words of the Wobblies, “building the new soci-

ety within the shell of the old.” Quite simply, people begin producing the goods and services they decide together are needed, and those that need them get them. The founding principle of such a society is that the freedom of each one of us, far from being limited by our material and psychological interdependence, actually grows out of it, as blades of grass grow from the root-web just under the soil. To care for each other, then, is to care for ourselves. A truism, like much else I've said here, but no less true for that.

It's a cliché that love conquers fear. Solidarity does not mean love—though, as veterans of labor, civil rights, and women's struggles can tell you, it often leads to love. But it does mean acting *as if* we loved and were loved by the people we fight alongside, for justice, for pleasure, for creativity and imagination applied directly to the conditions of life—for a life in which we *really can*, as we yearn to, “breathe free.” PW

1. Rates of teen pregnancy declined through the '90s, probably because of better sex education funded by the Federal government via such groups as Planned Parenthood. With the return to “abstinence-only” sex “education” under Bush, we can expect them to rise again.



ZOE NOE

HAVING YOUR CAKE AND EATING IT TOO / no puns allowed without an anal massage.

# “A STRIKE BY ANY OTHER NAME”

Natasha Moss-Dedrick

TAKE A CLOSE LOOK AT THE BADGE ON THE GROCERY WORKER'S CHEST next time you go to pick up toothpaste at a Safeway (Vons), Kroger (Ralphs, Cala, Bell), or Albertsons. You might see one that reads, “I’m the property of [store name].” That’s how some of the 70,000 southern California grocery workers are expressing their feelings about their recent strike and lockout and the resulting contract. Some workers are biting their tongues, others are fighting among themselves, and nearly everyone is talking about quitting. But Doug Dority, the president of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) International until the end of the strike, called it “one of the most successful strikes in history.”

Last winter’s grocery workers’ strike was the biggest strike in almost a decade; not since the Teamsters’ 1996 UPS strike have so many workers been out on the picket line. The way this strike was handled speaks volumes about the (dis)organization and orientation of the UFCW—the union representing the grocery workers—and the labor movement in general.

My interest in analyzing the southern California grocery worker’s strike comes from sadness about what is and a desire for what can be. I want people, workers, to organize their collective power, taste that power, and use it successfully. I tasted it once, when I was a bicycle messenger in San Francisco. In 2000 my co-workers and I organized against very crappy wages and conditions and for worker control at the company. We actually won big, and we did it outside union channels and without negotiating a written contract. To my surprise, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (the official union trying to organizing bike messengers in San Francisco) impeded us in many respects. My “union, yes” attitude was shaken up by the experience, leading to important questions and interesting possibilities.

The UFCW “strategy” employed in the southern California grocery workers’ strike was dead on arrival. Many strikers and observers believe the union didn’t do enough before, during, and after the strike to organize the workers, broaden the fight, and hurt the companies. Ray Rogers of Corporate Campaign, Inc., a firm that helps unions strategize, put it bluntly: “With that number of workers idled full-time..., with the proper direction, support, and strategy, they not only should be able to win a strike, they ought to win a revolution.” The UFCW is the AFL-CIO’s biggest union, with 1.4 million members. It has enormous human and material resources, and yet it led its strong and determined members to defeat.

“Now it’s just another job, not like it used to be. It’s no career anymore. Everybody lost respect and trust in the union, and of course, we don’t trust the store.... We didn’t win anything; in fact we lost a lot,” says Lydia Baouni, who invested almost 30 years of work in the unionized grocery store industry. Things haven’t worked out the way she

expected. She worked full-time at Safeway until two years ago, when she moved to Ralphs after being dismissed from Safeway for pursuing charges of sexual harassment in the workplace. At Ralphs she started at the bottom, working part-time as a courtesy clerk, bagging groceries and servicing the deli. She went from making \$19 an hour as a daily manager and training coach to making less than \$7 an hour.

Lydia was a shop steward for UFCW Local 770 at the Silver Lake store in the Los Angeles area until just before the recent strike. She stepped down from the position because she didn’t like what she saw in the union. “When you ask questions [of the union] and they don’t have answers for you and are completely rude to you, why do I have to force myself to be 100% with them?”

Even so, at the urging of her fellow workers, Lydia took on the role of picket captain at her store when the strike began in October 2003. She is very proud of her picket crew for the tenacity and strength they showed in holding the line for four-and-a-half months. They faced many hardships, including losing homes and cars, facing eviction, and going for months without health care. For working 30 to 40 hours a week on the picket line, strikers were paid \$240 in the beginning, and later \$100, while enduring winter rains, black smoke-filled skies from the raging southern California fires, threatening thugs, and an unprepared and uncommunicative union.

Lydia says the union’s “lack of communication is the number one reason things are falling apart” for the workers. The lack of communication and accountability from UFCW officials to union members came up repeatedly in my interviews with workers and community-based strike supporters. The union didn’t communicate to the workers about what was happening with the strike, so as Lydia spent each day and night on the picket line, her friends shared with her what they learned from the television news.

You might expect a union to provide its members with all information pertinent to making an informed decision about their future in the workplace. You might also expect a union to allow time for members to consider the details of a contract and to hold meetings to answer questions about it. That did-

n't happen with the UFCW in southern California. Eighty-six percent of the workers voted "yes" to a contract at the end of February 2004. The contract was nearly 30 pages long, but the members say they only received a partial summary. The union said it was the best contract workers were going to get and suggested they vote "yes." Workers were asked to vote on the contract on the spot or by the next day without any union-wide discussion.

What disappointed Lydia most during the strike was the union's decision to pull pickets from Ralphs stores a month into the strike. She was told, as the picket captain, to come to a late-night meeting regarding a secret that would be revealed the next day. At the meeting she learned that her crew would be moved from picketing their own store to picketing a Vons store because the union wanted "to give consumers a shopping option." At noon the next day, a union official told everyone to leave Ralphs. "I asked why and refused to leave, so he said, 'If you don't move the police are going to put you all in jail.' We were tired and mad. I said, 'I'm not going to move and my people are behind me.' So he asked everybody to move and they said 'No, we're behind her.' They brought a lawyer and all these people from the union. They tried to explain to us that they had made a contract with the store that if we didn't move they'd put us in jail. They even had our [strike pay] checks at the other store."

At Vons, her crew had to fight with customers, managers, and scabs as if it were day one. Saying the strikers were in their territory, thugs intimidated them by firing guns into the air, throwing eggs at them, and threatening to beat them up. Lydia says she stayed at the picket line from 7:00am until midnight because she didn't want anything to happen to her "girls", as she referred to the many single mothers on her crew. According to Lydia, the union did nothing to help and said there was no better location to offer them. Union officials, though, say they dispatched people to handle many of the frequent reports of violence against picketers. The strikers remained at Vons for nearly three months before they returned to picketing their own store. The union returned pickets to some Ralphs stores in mid-January after it became clear that the "big three" stores had made a deal with each other to share profits, thereby softening the financial impact of the strike, and taking advantage of the increase in sales at Ralphs due to the removal of the pickets. The strike and lock-out ended just over a month later.

## The Contract

The contract signed at the end of February made many concessions. The union made no gains; they just staved off some of the cuts the companies wanted. The average southern California grocery worker makes less than \$22,000 annually. It's the benefits and pay progressions which come with unionized grocery store positions that have made these jobs desirable for working-class people, especially women, young



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people, and single mothers. All that has changed with the new contract. A two-tier plan has been instituted in the stores, with one benefit and pay scale for new hires and one for current workers (those workers who were already employed by the companies when the strike and lockout began).

Multi-tier systems have become commonplace in union contracts. These systems effectively create a hierarchical work environment with people doing the same work for different pay. Upon returning to work, many grocery workers found their hours cut, with new hires given the cut hours at less pay. The new pay scale gives new hires as much as \$4 less an hour for the same work. To make matters worse, the duties of lower-paying positions have been expanded to include work formerly completed by workers in higher-paid positions.

While the union managed to prevent the creation of separate health benefit funds for new workers and current workers, the contract significantly reduces the health care costs of the employers at the expense of the workers. First, not only did the eligibility rules change so that new hires are ineligible for health benefits until the end of their first year of employment, but they also have to wait a year-and-a-half after that before their dependents can be covered. Second, insurance premiums are to be paid by all new hires, and beginning in the third year of the contract, current workers will be expected to pay premiums for their coverage as well. Finally, the employers now contribute approximately \$3 less per hour worked to the employee health benefit fund. These and other changes mean less, or no, health coverage for workers and their families. (For more information on estimates of the impact of this contract on workers and Californians in general, see <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/press/index.shtml>.)

As for the pension fund, again the union managed to prevent the companies from creating separate funds for new hires and current workers, but big reductions were made in employer contributions. Although very few new hires will likely stay with the companies long enough to get a pension, new hires now earn about half (80¢ per hour worked) of what current employees make.

The most devastating aspect of the new two-tier system is

something that many workers themselves did not understand when they voted on the contract. As current workers accept promotions into new departments, they are now paid the new employee wage! For example, under the old contract Cornelio Higuera, another Ralphs employee and a Local 770 member, was working between 30 and 40 hours a week, making \$17.90 for half of it and \$7.50 for the other half, depending on which position he was scheduled for. After returning from 141 days on strike, he was offered and accepted a promotion to the seafood department where he now works fewer hours and makes \$7.55 under the tiered system.

When I asked Rick Icaza, the millionaire president of Local 770 (the largest UFCW local in southern California, with 20,000 grocery clerk members) why strikers say they are finding out the hard way that they, too, are subject to the two-tier system, he said such knowledge was “clear and unequivocal” before the signing of the contract and that Cornelio “shouldn’t have accepted the promotion.” I told him that when Cornelio tried to retract the promotion after he got his first paycheck, management told him it was too late. Icaza suggested he file a grievance. Cornelio and many other strikers and strike supporters said the union totally ignores its members. If the union responds at all, it is to blame the contract and claim its “hands are tied.”

Besides the pay and health care cuts, the grocery workers (unless they are among the many who have already quit or been laid off) are also being harassed at work using provisions of the new contract and the strike settlement agreement. The companies were given a 21-day period to do whatever scheduling and logistical changes were necessary to get stores up and running again. The contract also allows the companies to relocate workers to stores within a 25-mile radius of their home, and there’s nothing the workers can do about it. Those who were more militant on the picket line are feeling the heat, with transfers, shift changes, fewer full-time positions, and layoffs. One shop steward was transferred to three different stores within 24 hours. The strike totally altered the work environment, with low morale, feelings of betrayal by the union and the companies, and exhaustion. Adding fuel to the fire, strikers are working alongside scabs, as allowed by the contract. Workers say at least two scabs remain at each store, with many more working in the bigger stores. Furthermore, management forbids any talk about the strike, and even the use of the word “scab” is prohibited at jobsites.

In brief, the result of the contract is that workers who struck got the short end of the stick, losing what they had and gaining nothing. Unionized grocery work will change as the two-tier system is fully implemented: relatively decent wages and benefits will be largely replaced by unlivable wages and benefits. All this happened while 70,000 workers put themselves on the line for nearly five months, hoping the power of their collective actions, and their union’s strategy, would prevail. Maybe it should be no surprise that they didn’t.



TODD SANBORN

## What’s History Got to Do with it?

The UFCW is an amalgamation of many kinds of workers. It was formed in 1979 by the merging of the Retail Clerks International Union and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters union. Since then it has absorbed many others, from the Insurance Workers International Union to the United Garment Workers of America. The southern California UFCW locals are not used to fighting; last winter was the first time they were engaged in a serious battle with the grocers. But some of the union officials had previously been involved in big UFCW struggles.

Ex-International president Doug Dority had been with the UFCW for decades. His name is closely linked to the infamous 1985 Hormel meatpacking struggle in Austin, Minnesota. The UFCW local there, Local P9, leveraged its considerable power and spirit in order to win higher wages and address the serious safety issues at the plant. The International urged the members of the local to go on strike, and they did, for nine months. They created a strong community of workers and worker-supporters. They used the union hall as a community center where they shared skills and resources with one another. Apparently, however, P9ers were becoming too autonomous by trying to raise their wages several dollars above the standard pay of other UFCW meatpackers. So the UFCW got organized—they put the local into trusteeship and negotiated a concessionary contract.

According to Ray Rogers of Corporate Campaign, Bill Wynn, then-UFCW International president, sent Doug Dority to undermine P9’s efforts. Seven years ago, at a Laborers International Union conference, Dority made an eye-opening admission. Rogers explains what happened:

“I walked up to Doug, and said, ‘Ya know, you still have a terrible situation in the whole meatpacking industry, and you could really use our help.’ Doug responded, ‘The problem with you, Ray, is that you attack the people you work for.’ I said, ‘Wait a minute. I was working for and representing Local P9. Are you talking about that situation?’ He said, ‘Yeah’. I said, ‘Why was it that an international union that couldn’t spend one penny to help out these workers who were fighting so

hard against concessions but they could spend millions of dollars [on] 30 organizers, 30 rent-a-cars, and 30 hotel rooms to undermine and destroy everything that this union and my organization were fighting for.' He looked at me and said, 'I'm the guy that sent them in.' So, I looked at him and said, 'You should be real proud of yourself, you set the labor movement back decades.' He was then real anxious to get away from me."

Dority isn't the only UFCW official with a duplicitous history. Joe Hansen, the man who recently took over as International president, was also in Minnesota at the time of the Hormel strike, working as assistant to the regional director. According to Jim Guyette, the president of Local P9 during that strike, "Joe Hansen was the guy who sold the Austin workers down the road." He was involved in negotiating the contract that meant many of the strikers wouldn't get their jobs back and created a two-tier system in the plant. "Unfortunately," Guyette says, "the most militant trade unionists find themselves without a job. They're the ones that buy the union line on how to win a strike, and those are the ones the union never gets back to work." After working for over 18 years in a plant, Guyette himself became one of those workers. Ray Rogers says the meatpacking industry has never recovered from the concessions made by the union and is still one of the most horrendous and dangerous industries in the United States (for more on this, read *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*).

Comparing the Hormel strike with the southern California grocery strike, Guyette says the "same method of operation" was used by the UFCW. His advice to UFCW workers who are considering a fight-back strategy: "You have to understand your union doesn't always have the same interests that the membership has. You have to look at the UFCW in the context of what's best for them. Their method of operation has been retrenchment and trading full-time jobs for part-time jobs."

## The Devil in the Details

Everyone, even UFCW officials, agrees that the fight should have been a national one. Union officials, however, told me that the necessity of employing a coherent, multi-faceted national strategy only became obvious in hindsight. For the most part, the struggle was isolated to southern California, even though other UFCW contracts expired at the same chain stores around the country, and other UFCW grocery worker strikes took place around the same time and over the same basic issues. No attempt was made to use the national power of the union to fight the national companies and their national resources. The union handled, and continues to handle, each contract negotiation individually or regionally. Both Rick Icaza and Ron Lind, secretary-treasurer of San Jose Local 428, declared that the grocery stores "are no longer regional," family-owned operations—as if to suggest that prior to this, it hadn't dawned on them that they represent workers at stores that are giant chains

stretching across the country and, in the case of Safeway, into Canada. Although union officials acknowledge that the need for a national campaign is now obvious, the union's actions around the country show otherwise.

Both Icaza and Lind said the companies' hard line was out of character, implying that that's why the union was caught off-guard. "Safeway and the union had a bond. [Safeway CEO] Steve Burd changed that," said Lind. Sounding a little forlorn and still surprised by the companies' approach, Icaza lamented, "We had a working relationship with the industry that was a win/win situation."

Icaza even told me that it wasn't a surprise that the stores intended to make big cuts during these contract negotiations. In fact, the UFCW had over a year's advance warning that the companies planned, as Burd put it, "to narrow the gap in every single negotiation without exception" by freezing wages or offering lump-sum payments; establishing a market-based rate for new hires; offering voluntary buyouts to senior employees; redesigning health-care packages; containing pension increases; and striving for more liberal work rules. Those are Burd's paraphrased comments as they were posted on the UFCW website, and excerpted from the November 18, 2002 issue of *Supermarket News*. Furthermore, Bernie Hesse, head of organizing for UFCW Local 789 in Minneapolis, told me a real campaign "should have been set up two years ago when Safeway started sending out VHS tapes to workers saying, 'This is the economy we're in, and we're paying X amount an hour more than our competitors and we need to survive.'" So, the union knew it was coming, but didn't prepare for the fight. Workers say they didn't even know they would be striking until three days beforehand.

In explaining its hard line, the grocery industry said it needed to reduce wages and health-care costs because of the "Wal-Mart threat" and the need to be able to compete with the low-wage, non-union employer. The UFCW in southern California countered that Wal-Mart plans to build "only" 40 stores in California over the next four years, taking just 1% of the market share. Even so, a short time before the strike and lockout, the UFCW raised membership dues in order to build a fund to prevent Wal-Mart from coming into the region. In April, a campaign in which the UFCW participated successfully prevented Wal-Mart from building a store in Inglewood, California. The UFCW has embarked on union drives at various Wal-Marts around the country, but hasn't won a battle with the giant yet. So instead, they're spending union money to fight Wal-Mart's expansion. (Wal-Mart is the biggest private employer in the United States, with over one million workers. Its record on labor issues here and abroad, environmental issues, and the destruction of locally owned stores is atrocious.)

Union officials also point to Wal-Mart when discussing the cuts in the southern California contract. Minneapolis's Bernie Hesse said, "These jobs, even though they took an ass-

kicking, are still the premier jobs in retail because they're organized, they have benefits, and for the most part these jobs pay a living wage. If you go to the unorganized side of retail—Wal-Mart, Target, Kmart—most of these jobs are not even close to this.” Unfortunately, as a result of this contract, there are significantly fewer grocery jobs paying a living wage. Unlivable union wages are a bad advertisement for unions. It's no wonder many potential union members reject unionization on the basis of paying dues—it's hard to make the argument for dues when many union members make \$7 an hour and others are laid off after taking collective action.

The executives and shareholders of the grocery stores lost more than \$2 billion in collective revenue as a result of the strike, but they consciously took such a hit in order to lower their labor costs and divide and conquer their workforce with a two-tier wage and benefit system. In fact, Steve Burd called the losses an “investment in our future.” Last year, while the supermarkets cried “Wal-Mart,” they profited in the billions. Now, they're hoping to impress shareholders and raise stock prices with lowered costs of doing business in southern California and the presumption that they will produce similar results as more contracts expire around the country.

The UFCW leadership defends this strike as a victory. The fact that the workers held the line and stuck it out for as long as they did is a sign of solidarity and determination, for sure. Icaza says the economic hit the stores took as a result of the strike is a victory for the workers. But let's not forget that Safeway and Albertsons are Fortune 50 companies. Safeway's annual revenue (not profit) is larger than the revenues of corporations like McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and PepsiCo. Who truly, tangibly took a hit from the strike is the workforce that stayed on the picket line, not the shareholders of the companies, or the local union officials who make up to \$200,000 annually. Though Doug Dority said that employers everywhere got the message “that attempts to eliminate health care benefits will come at a high price,” that price isn't high enough! (For more information on tactical and operational lessons learned, see the April 2004 issue of *Labor Notes*.)

Many workers and community supporters were disturbed that so many goods made it onto store shelves during the strike. The UFCW didn't put up pickets at the distribution centers until over a month into the strike, when the stores were already stocked for Thanksgiving, and those pickets stayed for only a few weeks. Why this happened isn't exactly clear; Icaza says the union waited for the go-ahead from the Teamsters, the union representing the workers who drive trucks from the distribution centers to the stores, and that pickets were removed when the Teamsters' strike funds ran out. This situation highlights the lack of coordination between the two unions.

Most of the time, when the distribution centers weren't being picketed, truckers drove to the stores and turned their engines off near the picket lines instead of parking at the load-

ing area as they normally do. Some drivers didn't go any further, while others left ignition keys on the seat, allowing managers or scabs to take the truck the rest of the way. Some Teamsters called in sick and showed solidarity with the grocery workers in other ways.

“It doesn't matter how much stuff gets into the stores,” according to Ron Lind of the San Jose local. He is also the spokesperson for the UFCW Bay Area Coalition, which represents eight locals with contracts expiring September 11, 2004.

If a union is a structure within which workers build power and solidarity together, then efforts to encourage that must happen all the time, not just in reaction to a particular negotiation period. The work of a union is to defend the immediate interests of the workers, but even within this limited framework they didn't deliver. The excuse that they were unprepared for the fight because grocery industry negotiations have always been smooth ignores that they had over a year's warning that the companies planned something different this time. It also reveals huge holes in the union's overall mission.

## Union, Yes?

Most unions in this country, including the UFCW, appear to be purely on the defensive—struggling to maintain what they have, not pushing for more. This is a sad reality. Workers make the world go round, while a small, wildly demented, and shortsighted elite direct which way it spins. As long as thinking critically about unions and rethinking working-class strategies for gaining economic, social, and political power are regarded as either anti-union or a handshake with the bosses, the working class will suffer from a lack of strategy and vision.

A labor union is nominally an alliance of workers set up to advance the interests of wage earners, and those interests can be defined narrowly or broadly. I'd like to see new kinds of unions, ones that are understood as organizational bodies from which workers not only build power to determine wages and benefits and to ensure safe working conditions, but also that function as power bases in alliance with the communities in which workers live. As it is now, a clear dichotomy exists that asks us all to see our lives in at least two parts—as workers, and then separately as people living our lives. In that separation, we lose power. If we look at our work and ask, “What purpose does this job serve?” and “Does this job support the development of the kind of world I would like to live in?” we will often find that we are working against ourselves. This realization can help us determine how to focus our collective energies not just on immediate needs, but on long-term visions as well.

There are many repetitive, dangerous, and meaningless jobs that serve only to maintain the capitalist system while creating inequality and destroying the environment. Unions today don't address how the narrowness of their struggles actually works against the people they claim to represent. When workers' struggles focus only on specific working con-

ditions, keeping their immediate work interests separate from all other interests, they actually reinforce the system that enslaves them.

A lot of important work doesn't get done, while a lot of destructive work does. Teachers and nurses are being laid off everywhere, not because we need them less but because there is less profit in caring than in killing. Creating sustainable food systems; ratcheting up the development of new energy systems; developing more options for recycling and reusing "waste"; facilitating the spread of new and old practices for revitalizing polluted water, air, and soil; designing more public space for arts, education, and recreation—these are all endeavors that a visionary society might choose to undertake.

But as working-class people, we don't have conversations about the value or the appropriateness of the work we do, nor is it in the interest of unions in their current forms to promote these conversations. At their (rare) best, union decisions are made democratically, participation by the rank and file is high, and workers make gains on the job. At their (all-too-common) worst, none of this is true, and instead unions like the UFCW seem to purposefully work against even the immediate interests of workers.

At first glance it may seem paradoxical, but unions have more in common structurally with the bosses than the workers. Neither would make money if not for the workers, and both rely on the predictability of the workforce in order to maintain their positions. Just as employers aren't interested in workers gaining the collective power needed to make changes to the current set-up, neither are unions, because they lose credibility as workers act outside the established protocols. A really organized group of workers is likely to come up with its own demands and tactics, which would create problems for the union officials whose job it is to make sure that workers play by the rules. In other words, it's not in the interest of union officials for workers to become a strong and unified force; it's not in their interest to truly organize the workers. This is easily seen in the UFCW struggle: with all the human and material resources at their command, if the UFCW had truly wanted to organize workers, they certainly would have.

The UFCW, and most unions today, attempt to increase membership by promising "job security." Not unlike "national security" in a capitalist-run world, "job security" is propaganda. It's a fraud. When the power of unions has been largely curtailed by labor laws to the advantage of bosses; when most contracts contain no-strike clauses; when the legal way to handle an unjust firing or demotion is to file a "grievance" that won't find its way through the National Labor Relations Board process for years; when, in short, all aspects of the relationship between bosses and workers are made predictable through the union contract, there can be no promise of job security. When companies pick up and leave the country to reap the benefits of some other workers' cheaper labor, there is no job security. To suggest otherwise is a lie, and yet unions



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do it all the time.

We could be deciding what's important to us, and what we'd like our lives to look and feel like. But instead of talking about what work is worth doing for the sustainability and health and joy of all life, the discussion is about which jobs we want to protect from being mechanized or taken to workers across the border; it's about keeping crappy non-union jobs out, so we can maintain our often crappy union jobs. No wonder union membership continues to diminish—there's so little vision, so little connection made to the other aspects of our lives.

70,000 people in southern California experienced a long strike and all that comes with it. Those workers saw their bosses and their union in action. The vast majority of them had probably never been involved in anything like it, and many say they were changed by it. People tasted solidarity and felt the hierarchies of class like never before. Craig Bagne, from a Manhattan Beach Ralphs store, tells a story about a box boy who was a troublemaker on the picket line. "A union representative and I were on our way to another store and we asked the box boy to come with us. The union rep told him if he wasn't willing to fight then to get out of here. Weeks later, he began to show up at rallies, then he wanted the bullhorn, and after that he was out there leading the charge. It's incredible to see people change.... a box boy, a natural born leader."

What kind of organizing will bring the "box boy leader" and the rest of us working-class folks into strong, strategic, and visionary movements that work together to up-end the system? Are there ways to change unions and make them strong advocates and organizing bodies for all working-class concerns? Or do we need to scrap them altogether and create new organizations with new ideas and strategies? Or is doing

some of both the answer? What we largely have now in the labor movement is not just bad leadership, but institutional stagnation and backwardness. The world has changed a great deal since trade unionism began, and a reassessment of

unions is overdue. I hope it starts by discussing our visions of what we want our lives and our communities to look like.

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PHOTO: ZOE NOE

Neighborhood protests in San Francisco's Noe Valley have met the closing of a local organic food market with steady opposition.

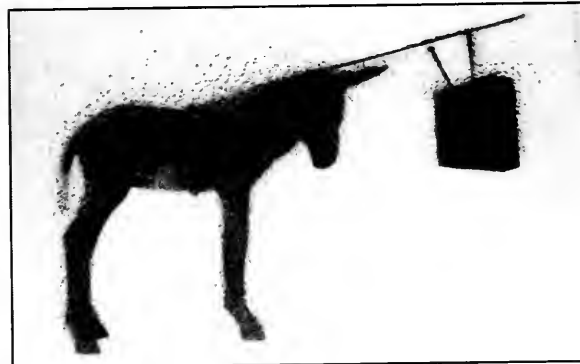
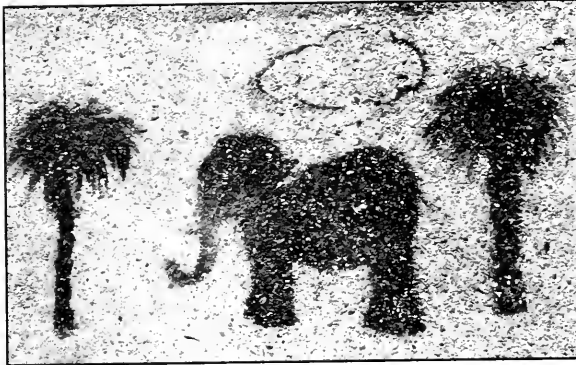
# AC TRANSIT

BY SUMMER BRENNER

my name is thank you	we public servants thank you
my name is thank you	stop cutting the bus thank you
my badge number is 12549 thank you	stop laying people off thank you
you don't know what I feel thank you	stop doing this thank you
you laid me off thank you	I need to be at work thank you
laid me off thank you	we need our jobs thank you
you let the people down thank you	my name is John thank you
you with your big job thank you	my name is Sequoia thank you
big house big car thank you	my name is Celeste thank you
you chop off one hand thank you	you laying off mechanics thank you
want me to do my job with the other thank you	that's a disgrace thank you
you hurting morale thank you	that's a death warrant thank you
you laid off my girl thank you	those buses can't stop thank you
she come to live with me thank you	those buses don't work thank you
I can't refuse OT thank you	those buses filthy thank you
I got to feed the grandbaby thank you	I invite you to come down thank you
we need our service back thank you	I invite you to ride my bus thank you
we need it all over the place thank you	I work from 9 to 7 thank you
we need service people thank you	what you hearing today thank you
	we hear everyday thank you

we hear complaints thank you	this bus company going down thank you
we hear it all the time thank you	20 years ago it was something thank you
old people can't get out thank you	20 years ago we be proud thank you
young people can't get home thank you	you give us something to serve thank you
we hear it all the time thank you	we serve it thank you
you not respecting thank you	now we got nothing thank you
when I speak to you thank you	this company going down thank you
you not respecting thank you	it's on the record thank you
your face is down thank you	it's on the record thank you
your mind made up thank you	the way you do thank you
you looking down thank you	I'm voting you out thank you
I'm talking thank you	you going down thank you
you not listening thank you	thank you
you ain't looking thank you	thank you





DONKEY W/TV GRAFFITI FROM FLORENCE, ITALY, SUMMER 2004  
ELEPHANT IN PARADISE. PHOTO BY ZOE NOE, SAN FRANCISCO

#### MUDDVILLE GAZETTE

The Penguin Nine were looking pretty royal in their robes  
The sun looked on, down in the land of Jeb and orange groves

As spitballs flew and squeezes squeezed and fair was foul, until  
A sour pulp was all we had to chase the bitter pill

Southpaw Al had been called out but we'd all seen him slide  
The jersey that the ump wore looked just like the other side's

Al lodged a feeble protest, so the Nine put on a show  
They belted out the Banner song then murdered Hit the Road

A different kind of game began, Big Dick cried "PLAAY CABAL!"  
The dogs of war, boys, would not hunt, Humpty tried to stall

He fell like Humpties always do, the dogs are barking now  
They bark for me, they bark for you, but Casey can't be found

—klipschutz

#### MR. GHAST'S LETTER

You were a silent movie  
a boxed dialogue  
a touchless day  
we never recovered from your illness.

Sputnik, the fantastic four,  
what weight a hummingbird;  
a flag, a test pattern  
the anthem and the hush of broadcast snow

the dilemma of negotiations:  
we would set fire to silence  
or die in another's sleep.

It was a long time ago;  
words have a different purpose now  
and anyone can write about fire

Non citizen.

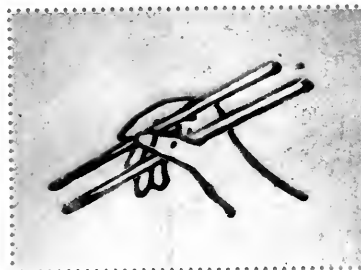
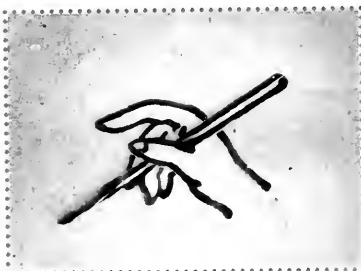
Anti citizen.

the heart, the fracture point in this  
the knot of icy ribbons winding through glass

the path through these woods opening like a  
burning book  
you know the story, as tragic and fragile  
as Claire Bloom in the limelight  
dancing before the painted forest

but I heard it differently  
a still thing living so passionately  
it spontaneously combusts  
burning down to paper silence  
yet living to tell the tale.

—Raven



CHOPSTICKS GRAFFITI PHOTO BY WWW.STENCILARCHIVE.ORG

RUST BELT & CO.

*Battleships, the Jaws of Life, pizza ovens. . .*  
Even on the bridge, who thinks of Steel?

The epic forge, the poetry of slag,  
Henry J., a Kaiser of our own.

*Refrigerators, scaffolding, safe deposit boxes. . .*  
Container ships that clear the Golden Gate at low tide.

So this is what, a scavenger hunt? a phonic barge?  
A Johann Cougar Mellencamp libretto?

O Danny Boy, Pete's Sake, The Love Of Mike:  
Made things we don't anymore.

Others do. Tariff Man found God  
And lost his superpowers overnight.

—klipschutz

RADIO FREE SAN FRANCISCO

Rejoice People of Iraq

The President of the United States  
has announced he will erect  
a prison to be proud of, demolishing  
the old with its unreconstructed past.  
He never said expressly, precisely,  
he will *empty* the old prison first,  
so best stay clear of its iron fist embrace.  
(Assumption is the province of the Lord.)  
If he says he moves with a swagger  
called *walking* in Texas, our man  
who means every last word  
he can't quite pronounce: it is so.  
He will build you your own Alamo.

\*

Sovereignty

Six days after the reins were passed  
to the sovereign Interim Cabinet,  
Fourth of July was observed,  
Mom, apple pie & Jesus,  
hotdogs & fireworks  
above Saddam Hussein's  
hometown of Tikrit.

—klipschutz



GRAPHIC BY DOUG MINKLER

**Except When Their Lips Move**

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

During my youth as a cyst  
time passed without accent.

Now, as a mature tapeworm  
I often find myself swimming upstream.

—William Talcott

ON THE INSTALLATION  
OF A PORCELAIN CROWN

When the artificial  
replaces the real  
you feel diminished  
yet improved.

—William Talcott

THE OTHER SHOEHORN DROPS

so boss if communism  
wuz the god that failed  
iz capitalism the dog  
boss that plays strip poker  
& bares red gums white fangs  
when he runs out of fur to show?

—klipschutz

TOWARD THE END

Toward the end of my second childhood  
the soft-spot returned.

—William Talcott

# ON THE BLEEDING EDGE

Primitivo Morales

IT'S A DECENT JOB—LOTS OF “BLEEDING-EDGE” TECHNOLOGY AND EVERY DAY IS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE. Of course, half the time I would tell you it's horrible. On balance, since I sometimes refer to the company as “we,” it is apparently a good enough job to seduce my on-and-off allegiance.

I am, in essence, a glorified file clerk: a Database Administrator, or DBA. Actually, my business card calls me a “Database Engineer” but I think that's either wishful thinking on the part of my employers or one of those “title-instead-of-money” deals. My job is to keep track of a lot of information—no different than any other clerk's tasks.

Traditional file clerks usually only deal with small amounts of documents—a few hundred thousand, maybe. The Pentagon devised a unit of measurement called a “linear drawer foot”—one foot of closely packed documents—to describe the total capacity of some of their stores of documents, which even in the 1970s were measured in miles. The principles remain the same—be able to find “stuff” quickly.

A vague analogy can be made with pilots on combat missions; long periods of boredom interspersed with moments of terror. OK, my terror is not for my life but the principle remains the same. For example, about once a week I am “on call,” meaning computers that I have never seen send me messages about problems I don't understand. I have a list of instructions to follow which mostly resolves the issues. Most of the problems can be passed on to someone else—networking issues, for instance. But others become “mine” and we then enter into an intimate relationship, the problem and I. So far I have resolved, or at least explained away, all of these. But one day I may be handed a problem I can't solve and then the company will replace me with someone who can.

Busy doing what, you might ask? Or does it really matter? The conditions I am describing exist throughout the industry from Silicon Valley through “Silicon Gulch” (Austin) all the way to the 128 corridor around Boston, and for all I know, all the way to Mumbai. The ‘product’ is of little importance, as long as it makes a profit.

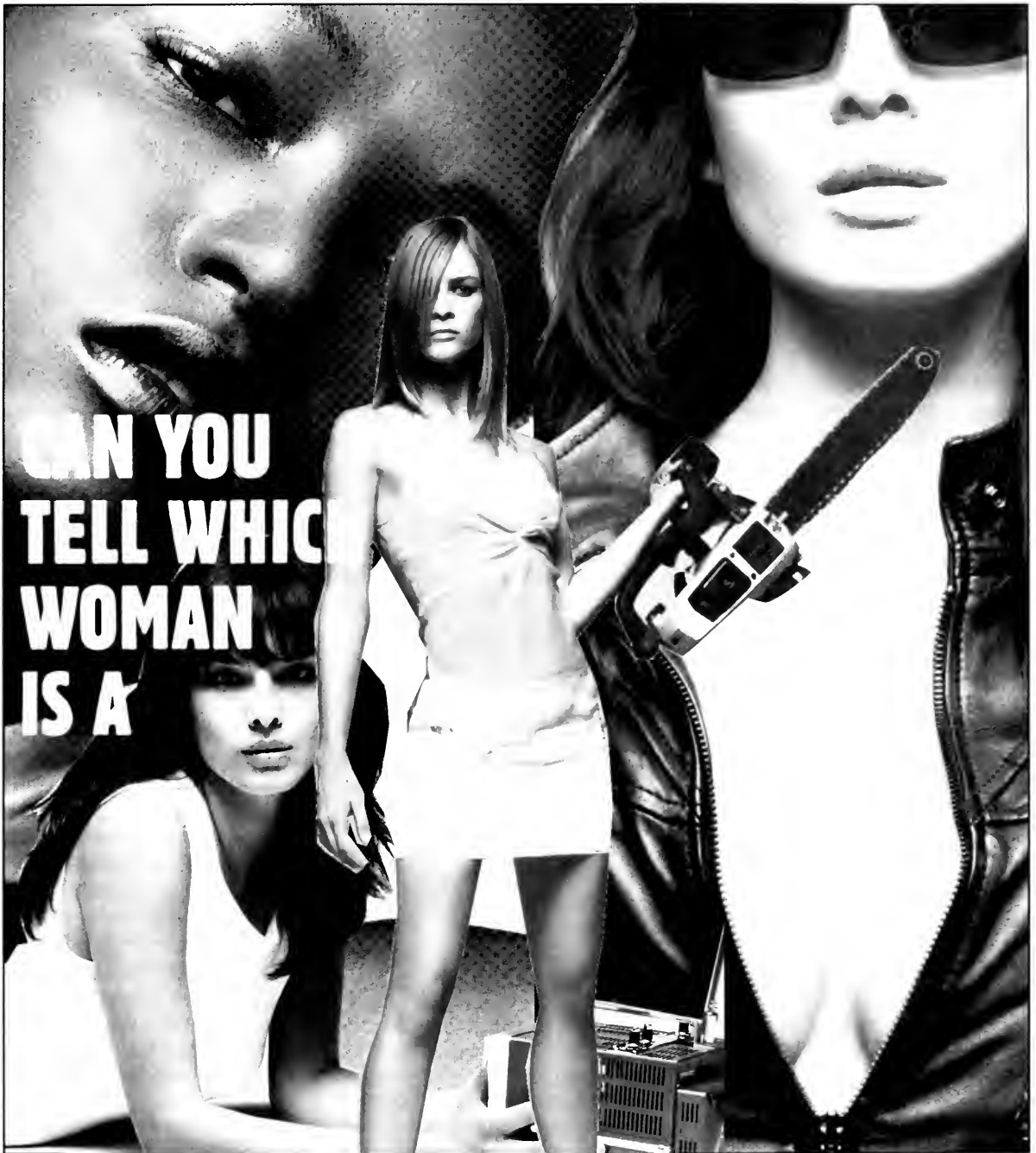
A goodly portion of my work for many years is best summed up as “helping businessmen count money faster and more accurately” (I've worked in banks and for VISA, among other esteemed handlers of currency). This is the core of most computer professionals' jobs, at least in the “applications” world; people who make operating systems and other tools are more akin to workers who make the machine tools that companies like GM use to make cars.

And we do indeed have a “product”—pictures. We sell aerial and satellite imagery both from a web site and on CD/DVD. The company does not produce the images—they are bought or rented from companies that have satellites or fly the aircraft that take the pictures. My job is making sure that when some client (an architect, a district attorney, a city planner, a “hi-tech”

worker in India digitizing maps of roads, etc.) looks at a picture of some sagebrush outside of Phoenix, we know how much money we got for it, and that the proper cut goes to the owner of the image (“Royalty Check, honey” in Frank Zappa's words). At peak we produce about 25 images a second, which can work out to a lot of companies accumulating absurdly small amounts of money (forty percent of one-third of one-half cent). But hey, no amount of money is absurd, it adds up, right?

There are interesting contradictions in this product. We spend more computer time (which may in a sense be equated with money) making a large image than a small one, so the company likes to charge by size. Sensible enough, as far as it goes. But whenever someone looks at our imagery—whether browsing or just window-shopping—we splash a logo over it to make it worthless for resale. In so doing we “burn quite a few cycles,” i.e. spend computer time to add the watermarks. Of course, sometimes there is a charge for nothing at all; we charge extra money to show little lines with text—representing roads, for instance—because it takes additional cycles to figure what roads are in the area, but if you use this feature and draw an image of a place with no roads, you still get charged—knowing that nothing is there is information, too.

I get paid well—about twice the median income of people in the San Francisco area; when I was hired three years ago it was on the upper side of wages for comparable work; with no raises since then my real income has decreased by a measurable percentage. Bonus? You get to keep working next year (actually, I was given a Christmas bonus for 2003—\$100.00!). The dollar amount disguises the long hours—lots of our work needs to be done at night at home because the computers are less busy and we will cause less disruption to paying clients. On the other hand, management never can trust the worker to work, so we all have to spend 25+ hours at our desks just so they can see and feel reassured. People commute from the Central Valley—Modesto and Tracy for instance—and are spending hours driving back and forth when they could be working; a terrible loss to business. It is a rare week that any of us logs less than 50 hours; some tend more towards the 70+ work week. Perhaps not coincidentally, there were major layoffs in spring 2002—one-third of the company. Since I



GRAPHIC BY PRIMITIVO MORALES

## **Treehugger? • Suicide Bomber? • Outside Agitator?**

started, no less than half of the jobs have been eliminated with a few new hires in sales.

In the past week, as I write this, my boss has quit. Apparently the thinking (if you can call it that) was that her job would get spread over two other people and there would be no impact on delivery dates or site performance. On her

last day there was a clash between her sidekick (the head of operations per se, and a very knowledgeable fellow) and management. Sometime between 10:30 and noon he was removed from email and had his accounts shut off. The rest of us responded by drinking rum for the remainder of the day. It will be interesting to see if management continues its policy

of reality denial and fantasy. As least part of their psychosis is the belief that software, and the workforce that produces it, is standardized in the same way automotive parts have been. Interchangeability is not simple in the world of computers, or at least outside of the assembly lines that produce the hardware itself. The creation of programs is much more like the craft industries of the mid-nineteenth century. In the meantime, the rest of us are busy trying to do our jobs as well as covering for others.

My stock in trade, as it were, is not the imagery itself—some 25-30 terabytes<sup>1</sup> of highly compressed imagery in all. My interest is information about the images—their spatial coordinates, when they were taken, their origin. The databases contain detailed maps of every block of every road in the United States. I'm responsible for moving the data around, keeping it backed up and making sure it's available when needed. Clerical work at its finest.

In addition to the administrative chores there is a constant pressure from a source familiar to any reader of *Capital*—the foremost mechanism by which the industrialists make more money is by renovating their plants, whether by upgrading or by discarding old ones in favor of new ones. And so it is in the computer shop, supposedly so far from the industrial revolution—"silicon" is our avatar, not iron.

And yet, curiously, the machines themselves are sometimes referred to as "iron"—as in "heavy iron," meaning fast computers. They are called, again an echo of earlier relationships, "servers" and are kept in "cages" (because they are dangerous?) on a "farm" in Silicon Valley. I've never been to our cage, but I've seen photos. It is a chain-link cage in a large building run by some corporate giant. While we are isolated in cubicles, our machines are kept on racks connected to each other (and us) with cables, "switches" and "routers" (specialized computers that move data)—even the simple drawings of our "architecture" are complex.

But having gotten it to work is not enough, we have to replace various bits and pieces. Because of changes in hardware (out go the leased Sun servers, in come the purchased Dell servers), software (Linux instead of Solaris, mostly) and applications (postGres, an Open Source database, replacing Informix, now owned by IBM; old image servers that

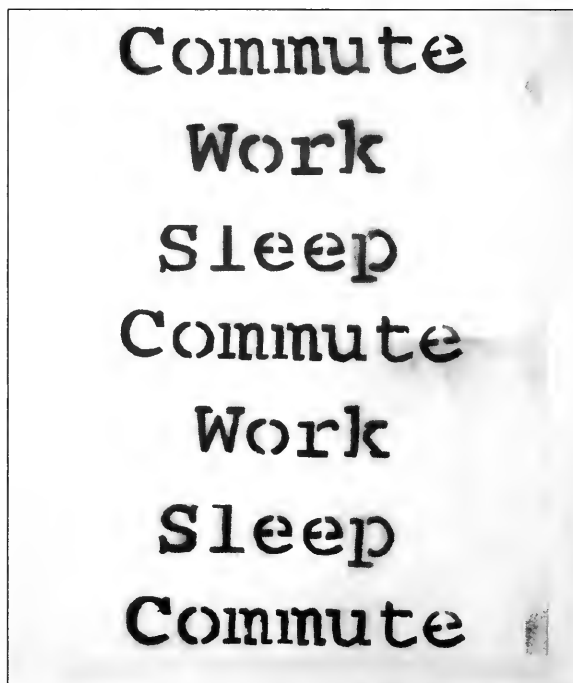
depended on expensive licensed "libraries" being replaced by new code written in-house, etc.) we have been spending a lot of time replacing almost every component while it is running. Imagine changing almost everything on your car except the chassis and the license plate while driving down the freeway.

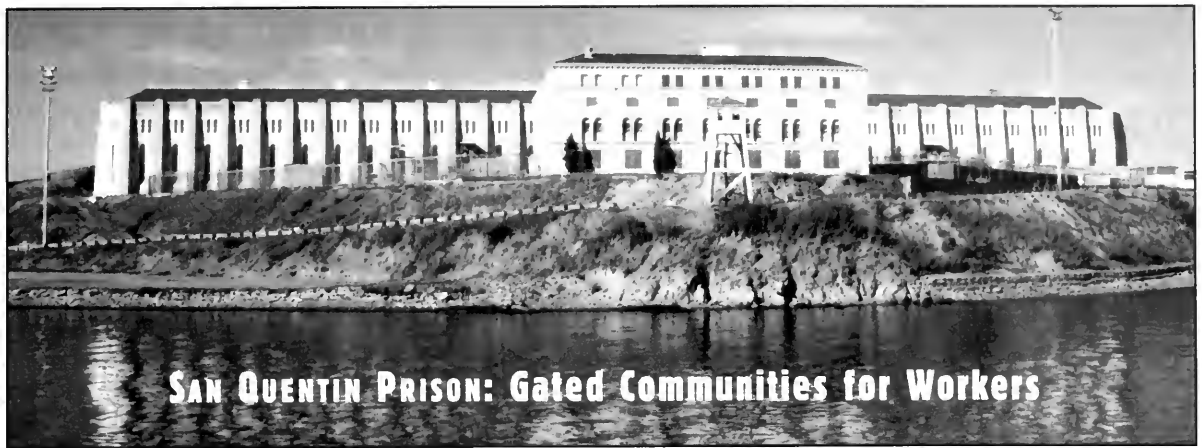
At work we use the analogy of driving down a freeway, almost always in the context of driving by looking only in the rear-view mirror. We are constantly monitoring the site but from a certain distance. Billing issues tend to take a day to be seen, while our computer monitors show nice graphs that are only a few minutes out of date at any given instant. To really see what is happening takes actual people. And when something unexpected (i.e. unpleasant) is happening, four or five or more of us will be communicating by voice, phone, email and instant message, sometimes simultaneously. After a frantic spasm of intensely cooperative work we return to our usual tasks.

The daily work is itself intensely collaborative, yet also curiously alienated. Each of us has a focus; the operations people deal with various aspects of the site as a whole, the content people set up new imagery, programmers work on different aspects of the software, quality assurance tests and retests things. This is not a company in which the bosses or managers don't have a clue—my boss knew her stuff, and the head of the company, although not primarily a computer geek, certainly knows the remote sensing/GIS (Geographic Information Systems) business well. Ergo, mistakes are hard to cover up. As the DBA I need to "work closely with" (i.e. get ordered

around by) virtually everyone in the company, from accounting and sales, programmers and ops people. Even my boss and the CEO occasionally give me direct tasks.

There is the usual grouching about conditions common to most workplaces. Yet there is no feeling of solidarity, even among the people I have the most in common with (shared interest in jazz, or cooking, etc.). There's a shared inaction based in part in the sense that there's nothing we can do and in part on a lack of trust. Confronted with the inexorable logic of business and cost containment, the ideology of "professionalism" becomes paralyzing. Professionalism means quite a few things—a vaguely positive attitude is a must, and a positive disdain for direct confrontation is mandatory. We adopt the common face and voice to discuss the "problems"—all of





GRAPHIC BY PRIMITIVO MORALES

which have been specified before we confront them and as such have already had all possible solutions defined before we even see them.

In one of the odd contradictions of such a “professional” environment, we are treated with a certain degree of respect, but we’re all expendable. Even as we watch one of our people hustled out the door after a summary layoff, the most we might do is have a *sotto-voce* discussion, usually with a friend of the departed.

My attitude is not the best, and I’ve been officially warned that the only reason I am still employed is because everyone who works with me thinks I do a stellar job. The problem? Apparently an anonymous someone has taken offense at some of my emails or IM sessions—no serious vulgarities but perhaps a mild expletive or two. That’s enough, along with management’s irritation at my continuous asking of the old utilitarian “*qui bono?*” (whose good—who benefits?) when confronted with stupid decisions. We get more and more of those, as the company is owned by a real estate company whose computer types are particularly clueless—they like to put “MSCE” after their names ... bragging about being a Microsoft Certified Engineer!

So people show a certain wariness in endorsing my opinions now, at least in public; it is not unusual for people to support me privately, after the fact. Although not allowed to formally question some business decisions, I can at least greet them with all the warmth that they deserve. Not much of a weapon.

But the battle is not necessarily totally one-sided. A slight plus in our column as workers in the software industry is that the process is not well rationalized—not “Taylorized.” It is very hard to predict how long a given (non-trivial) software project will take even for people who know the tools and problem well. There are no easy methods for determining productivity—counting key strokes works for typists but not for programmers—and because the problems are often ill-defined, we can sometimes get time back from the job, help each other by passing the buck on responsibilities and cover-

ing for each other. Such small actions do help build the sense of trust, or at least of common ground, that is a prerequisite for more meaningful solidarity.

We also have a shared interest in reliable tools and processes, and the advent of Open Source software—typically software whose “source-code” (original instructions, as opposed to a “compiled” program) is available to all. There are usually groups of people committed to a given tool who work collaboratively for its improvement, even though they may never meet. Applications that are available include graphics manipulation programs, office tools like spreadsheet and word processor, operating systems and HTML servers such as Linux or Apache, programs for creating maps or plotting spatial data, databases and so on. Because the people who create tools have an inherent interest in them there is little need for an incomplete or flawed version of the software to be released simply to meet a schedule. Problems tend to be well-documented and discussed, as opposed to the corporate model, where issues are often hard to discover because of non-disclosure contracts and company perversity. The programs themselves sometimes lack the bells-and-whistles of commercial products, but because the source code is available it can be extended or modified, and there are many people to help with support issues.

As a programmer I gain a better tool; as a person I am sharing in something that has an end result other than some money. It also helps to undermine the arrogant behemoths such as Microsoft and Oracle. The company gets quality software without having to pay endless license fees. One source of tension though, is that the company is benefiting from other organization paying to develop software (the spatial data tool we use was developed by a Canadian company paid by the Canadian government, which did not want to continue to pay large fees to US companies). Yet my bosses are agonized when faced with the need to spend a small amount of money to improve the tool—some other business might be able to benefit from this money! Amazingly short sighted—spend a few thousand to save a few hundred thousand dollars, and then

whine about it.

Recent events give me more of a sense of how my co-workers regard the company. A few months ago we were subjected to a company-wide survey conducted by a consultant using a web site. They claimed that all answers would be confidential, but the way we logged in guaranteed that they could track who had said what. So I suspect that the answers they got were slanted in the company's favor. On the last possible day I answered most of the questions, mostly honestly, after my then-boss got in my face about her group's low participation rate.

Afterwards, corporate sent a person from "Human Resources" to explain (away) the results. We were generally in line with the company on most of the survey but had responses in two major areas wildly lower than the company averages: benefits and company support for us. Now, keep in mind that the parent company is in the real-estate business, which has a peculiarly exploitative relationship with its workers—real estate agents, for instance, typically get only a commission and then have to pay money to "their" office to rent a desk, etc.

In the session I was in, *everyone* criticized the benefits. Sales, engineering and operations all criticized the insurance as expensive, "substandard" (this from someone who knows the insurance industry) and difficult to use. Everyone had harsh words for the "401K" plan: 6% is not "matching" the employees' contributions, and their proposed scheme actually seemed to ignore federal law about limits on employee contributions. Everyone had critical words for our time-off policy as well, again ranging from "illegal" (they don't roll unused vacation time over to the new year, nor do they pay you for it) to "cheap" and "outrageous."

The company's pretty words don't ever seem to have any money behind them. Fellow employees were not delighted with their pay, either, as most have had no raises for years. On paper the management supports employee's education, but in practice they have no money for technical classes of the sort I might need (typically one week with about 40 hours of instruction, costing between two and five thousand dollars, depending). We actually got this worthy functionary to laugh when, in the course of discussing how the company does not give us adequate support, we told her that our high-tech company gets *hand-me-downs* from a local (bankrupt) school system.

I am sure that in subsequent surveys we will simply be asked if we have been adequately informed about our crappy benefits, rather than the more risky ground exposed by the open-ended questions. And because the company is actually making money now on a month-by-month basis, they may actually provide us more of the tools we need to make them more money.

In the short run, however, we've had a Company Meeting in which they tried a smoke & mirrors production to pump us up—poorly mixed and stale rock tunes played over a slide show of company content and tools. This was followed with a passionate speech by the president about how hard he had fought for us, the ungrateful employees, when the company was sold to the *tejanos*. He pointed out that he had no stock or other vesting in the parent company, and was an employee just like us.

This may be true, as far as it goes, but management still is in denial: he was frustrated that only thirty percent of our projects were delivered on time. Given the sparse resources and constantly shifting requirements, doing a third of our deliveries on time is an excellent statistic. According to them, the problem is "communication" so now we'll spend more time in meetings. As one engineer said to me, "I spend 7 hours in one day now on meetings—how long until they realize that that is seven hours that I am not working?"

We have been put on committees with no power that will be able to make recommendations that management will be free to ignore; or if they are implemented it will be "at manager's discretion," a nice way of saying "never."

It is possible that we can gain some leverage over the situation now. It is clear that there is widespread dissatisfaction, but what exactly can be done is not clear. Hopes of controlling our local bosses are a bit thin; bringing our Texican masters to heel is a rather remote possibility. I can't see us actually having a picket line, but I think some combination of working only forty hours a week, declining those extra work shifts, and perhaps proposing that we all take time off together might provide leverage. Or perhaps not—there are no guarantees.

Well, it's 1:30 in the morning, and I have puzzles to solve before I sleep.

PW

1 a terabyte is 1000 gigabytes, a gigabyte is thousand megabytes, and megabyte is a million characters, if you care

#### THE DIGITAL SALUTE

Dissatisfaction tends to make itself known, although sometimes in ways that are hard to see. For example, one company that makes digital maps of streets found a curious set of lines in some work. The regular QA people had found no problems, but there was an automated QA process that examined all of the incoming work, and it applied rules that would be impossible for a human: in a computer model of roads there will never be a road segment that is not attached to other segments. Yet in this particular batch they found a number of lines attached to nothing else. When they zoomed all the way in they could see these lines with no labels or other data, but they made no sense. When they zoomed out to look at the whole US the lines couldn't be seen because of the way scaling and zooming work. Eventually they wrote a special filter to show just the lines with no connections. It made a large sketch of a big "fuck you" with an upraised finger in salute. Alas, these lines were removed before the world at large ever saw them, but it makes you wonder what else might be out there.

# TECHNOPRANKS

## CARVING OUT A MESSAGE IN ELECTRONIC SPACE

Jesse Drew

I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell:

*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*

I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next.<sup>1</sup>

THIS PASSAGE FROM MARGARET ATWOOD'S *Handmaid's Tale* provides a nightmarish projection of where US society is possibly headed, a place where communication between two people about their common oppression is forbidden. This simple message, scratched into the wall of a kitchen cupboard, will represent to some the utter futility of the protagonist's situation. Yet it also presents the potential spark of resistance and the fragile but triumphant re-emergence of truth. It has been the preservation and distribution of many such small truths that have shattered many a dictatorship, tyranny and autocracy.

### A Public Sphere

At the root of most conceptions of democracy, lies a very simple supposition, that a well-informed public engages on even ground in a contestation of ideas within a public sphere of communication and media. Vestiges of such ideas live on in the New England Town Hall meetings, and within our ideas of a free press.

Today, democracies like to present themselves as harbingers of a healthy public sphere, with traditions of a free press and the free association of citizens. Such window dressing seeks to conceal the anemic state of public discourse, particularly within the United States. The near-monopolization of all media by corporate conglomerates, and the paranoiac control of information by the State, with its vast Public Relations apparatus, its "embedded" reporters, and its system of "official" leaks and disinformation has made a mockery of claims to a well-informed citizenry. This corporate/government media nexus has locked communications into a one-way stream of messages from the centers of power to the periphery of spectators and audiences. Today an individual's ability

to compete in the marketplace of ideas is akin to throwing a message in a bottle into a vast ocean of corporate and government entertainment, punditry and infomercials, a Huxleyan stew of "feelies, orgy-porgy and centrifugal bumleppu." As Huxley himself said:

For conditions even remotely comparable to those now prevailing we must return to imperial Rome, where the populace was kept in good humor by frequent, gratuitous doses of many kinds of entertainment—from poetical dramas to gladiatorial fights, from recitations of Virgil to all-out boxing, from concerts to military reviews and public executions. But even in Rome there was nothing like the non-stop distraction now provided by newspapers and magazines, by radio, television and the cinema.<sup>2</sup>

Long ago, corporate power, like some kind of Frankenstein monster, arose from the dead scrolls of their articles of incorporation to become recognized alongside average citizens as "individuals" with the same individual rights accorded by the Constitution. In today's corporatocracy, Microsoft Corporation has the same rights as Joe Blow from Vermont to persuade the public with their point of view. In other words, the law, in its majestic equality, allows Microsoft and Exxon the same rights to buy primetime television time and nationwide billboard campaigns as you or I.

So, is public discourse dead? Are you reading these words scratched onto a cupboard wall? Hopefully not yet. Undeniably, there is still contested terrain in the mediascape, especially within the realm of electronic space. There is a vital tradition of independent and alternative media that historically has had two primary emphases: one aims at creating new channels of independent media, the other aims to expose the complicity of mainstream media. This division of labor is still evident within new electronic communications. Today's electronic media activists seek to create free spaces where information can be exchanged and discussed unfiltered and uncensored by power, as well as to subvert, expose, and hack away at the veneer of objectivity that shrouds corporate media.

## An Electronic Public Sphere

There has been much discussion in recent years about whether the expansion of cyberspace constitutes the creation of an electronic public sphere, centered around the Internet. In the early years of usenet groups, gopher sites, and on-line communities, many envisioned the birth of the nationwide town hall meeting, where each individual was equal to any other, and where all had equal voice and access to information. According to Benjamin Barber, in a nation the size of the U.S. with its great distances, electronic communication can assist in facilitating such a grassroots democratic process:

Once it is understood that the problem of scale is susceptible to technological and institutional melioration and that political communities are human networks rooted in communication, scale becomes a tractable challenge rather than an insuperable barrier.<sup>3</sup>

This utopian notion seemed to build steam with the advent of the World Wide Web, which allowed anyone to build a simple website with a few lines of html code and a couple of gifs. Such an opportunity proved irresistible to venture capital, however. Society launched headlong into the web-frenzied dot.com explosion of the late nineties. Within a short time, the .edu and .orgs were swallowed in a tidal wave of dot.coms, and the Internet was transformed from a decidedly anti-commercial space to a one-way commercial shopping platform.

Now that the wicked dot.com witch has melted down, perhaps we can begin to sort out what is left behind that still suits public discourse. When does electronic media space facilitate public discussion and exchange? Numerous exemplary cases and projects abound, from public access on-line discussion groups, to activists' networks, to political groups like Move-on.org.

Behind such newly emerging online activism, however, lies a legacy of radical, prankster and hacker practices that has blazed a path for such conventional communications. Some of these techno-practices are politically conscious, some unconscious, and some downright inane, ranging from the poetic to the polemical to the pornographic. Some are clearly legal but push the law, some are in gray areas, and some are illegal. But they fall within the classic traditions of pranksterism, where a sense of humor can be razor-sharp, or wielded as a blunt ax. The perpetrators are individuals claiming their place within public discussion. Such is the messy process of democracy.

Rapidly advancing technologies are making media production tools increasingly accessible, but channels for *delivering* these messages are increasingly restricted by a tightening noose of corporate and governmental control. The Committee for Democratic Communications of the National Lawyers Guild took on an important legal case, involving the opening up of FM radio frequencies to community-based Low Power FM radio broadcasters. Their position was ultimately upheld by the courts and even the FCC:

Although "full and free discussion" of ideas may have been a reality in the heyday of political pamphleteering, modern technological developments in the field of communications have made the soapbox orator and the leafletter virtually obsolete.

This decision helps to open a front in the electronic communications realm for real two-way exchange, since it effectively argued that to communicate electronically is a fundamental right of all citizens.

There have been few attempts to unify activities such as hacking, pranking and culture jamming. They spring from the same desire to have public input into a closed communications system. In the U.S., we have substituted a system of mass communications for the public sphere. This has eliminated public discussion in favor of the mass reception of messages from the centers of power. In an age of ruthless confiscation of public space, prankster forays into the mediascape are increasingly popular. The synthesis of humor, graffiti-writing, technical showmanship, grassroots activism and the DIY punk rock aesthetic appear in many of these media interventions. Rather than being mere background noise to cultural, social and political life, these practices represent a common effort to reshape the climate of ideas in the U.S.

Two main divisions in "technoprunksterism" reflect two primary camps of media activism—those working to build alternative channels of information and those who focus on disrupting corporate media. I refer to these two areas respectively as "New Electronic Spheres" and "Breaking the Façade."



Microscopic graffiti etched in silicon wafers, only visible through an electron microscope

## Breaking the Façade

It is hard to ignore that we are subject to a mind-numbing barrage of commercial messages, public relations ploys, political spin and other modern propaganda techniques. "Breaking the Façade" refers to the types of hijinks that chip away at the smooth veneer of these manipulative practices. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Dadaism, Surrealism and the Situationists contributed to the ways electronic pranksters expose the fallacy of mainstream media objectivity, corporate responsibility, and the benevolence of the State, often while violating our "common decency"!

### Photoshop Pranks (The Jackalope Tradition)

These images follow within a grand tradition of Tall Tales and satire, a blend of tongue-in-cheek and cut-and-paste, frequently mixed with dark sense of humor. Often designed by creative but bored office workers, these images proliferate on the distribution model created from a loose network that arose primarily to share jokes via Xerox and fax machines. With the massive and instantaneous distribution offered by the Internet, this material takes on greater significance. At times, even the mainstream media steps in to "set the record straight."

### Labor Traces

The desire for one's labor and creative effort to be recognized is a long-standing one, going back to early craft workers who branded or initialized metal work, pottery or woodwork. In an era of global labor, where pieces of labor come from disparate corners of the globe to be assembled and mass-marketed, individual recognition for work is almost non-existent. This is particularly true in the software and entertainment industries, where the name Disney or Microsoft subsumes the creative talent of tens of thousands of workers. There is evidence of leaving traces of one's individuality in much of these products, however. Some, like "permission" walls for graffiti, are let past the gate. Others surface later, often to the embarrassment of the megacorporation.

### Fair Use Versus Copyright Infringement

Where culture is increasingly trademarked, and all life seems to be "branded," it is only natural that many people want to speak back to the "LOGO." When we live in a media environment saturated by advertising and brands, these icons and symbols become just part of the environment, and fair game for commentary. In an era when corporate power has surpassed State power, these logos become political and ideological symbols, not just stand-ins for products. Besides, many members of the public are increasingly incensed at seeing their own culture stolen from them, to be repackaged and sold at the mall. Copyright infringement may be your greatest entertainment value, but it is increasingly litigious one.

### Web Hacks

Outright webhacks range from focused political education to



An infamous "flashing" frame embedded in a Disney film.

electronic graffiti. Sometimes the work can only be described as vandalism. Because the perpetrator must crack security and surreptitiously replace files on servers, this type of practice gets much publicity on account of its illegality. Regardless of the swapped content, the result of such intrusion is what I like to call the "Wizard of Oz" effect, in that they puncture the omnipotent strength of the victims. Who would know that the all powerful CIA, FBI, Pentagon and Department of Justice would have their ankles bitten by the teenage Totos of the hacker underground. I would argue that these frequent attacks have substantially degraded the once powerful images of these organizations.



Disney characters zoom by a stripper in a window in another embedded Disney cartoon.

## Google Hacks

There are certain other hacks, which are less illegal, but effective in delivering satirical answers to rhetorical questions. Google hacks direct questioners on the popular Google search site to phony error pages, that usually provide a humorous response to the question. News of these hacks are often relayed along the same distribution networks used by Photoshop pranks, circulated among networks of friends and colleagues, prompting the right question to ask. Probably not too many people would ordinarily go to Google and type in “miserable failure” and click the I’m Feeling Lucky button, and bring up the website of George W. Bush.

## False Websites, simulations and general disinformation

Following in the parody and satire vein, disinformation websites remain very popular and outrageous to those parodied. Since the web began, grabbing a website in the typical first-come, first-served way proved a convenient way to humiliate the party that was too slow to grab their own domain. (GWBush.com, for example) To add insult to injury, these sites usually imitate the object of satire, and serve to confuse



Tali-tubby and the “recovered film” hoax filled millions of e-mail boxes in the weeks after 9-11.

and agitate innocent visitors to these sites. Powerful interests are now trying to roll these sites back, however, by tying domain names into laws around copyright infringement.

## New Spheres of Discussion

The friendly accompaniment to “Breaking the Façade” is the creation of new spaces for the free exchange of information and discussion. Incredibly frustrating to official gatekeepers of information in the powerful media chains and in the State Department, this is one of the most promising developments of the Internet. Truth often begins to emerge here, before gaining a critical mass of believers. At this point, mass media often wades in with its spin, to avoid the embarrassment of being left far behind on an issue everyone is talking about.

## Public Files

One of the truly hopeful things about the web is that citizens can publish original documents, images and evidence, entire original sources un-filtered by mass media. This has led to some truly spectacular results. Recent publishing adventures include damning files from cigarette companies detailing their targeting of youth, recent documents on the instability of software for electronic voting, and health risks of eating at McDonald’s. This type of activity is probably the most frightening for powerful interests, because they allow hard data out for anyone to make up their own minds, and bypass “spin” put on the issues by PR and the media. Legality is often questioned, as sometimes theft is involved, but it seems clearly for now to be protected First Amendment activity.

## Peer to Peer

Peer-to-peer technologies have transformed the way files are shared, a decentralized activity that allows for random on-demand sharing of data. This enormously popular phenomenon is creating a new culture of mutual respect and responsibility, for it depends upon leaving ones computer folders available for public sharing, an anathema to corporate interests who have worked so hard to commodify information. Such files often consist of full-frame motion video clips, books, music, graphic arts and other cultural work. Such sharing is opening up a world of media to many people who

would otherwise not have access to these resources.

### Internet Activism and List Servs

E-mail must certainly be considered among the most powerful tools available for opening up public discussion, particularly among the burgeoning supply of dedicated list-servs available to join. For a great number of environmental, labor, cultural and other activist groups, this simple form of communication is allowing an unprecedented volume of one-to-one conversation. Although sprouting from the original model built around usenet groups, e-mail listservs bring regular information and action requests from like-minded individuals and organizations.

### Blogging the Night Away

An increasingly popular media activity is the "blog" or web log that offers instant reportage and opinion directly and instantaneously from the writer to the on-line audience. "Blogging" allows information to travel unfiltered to a limitless audience, acting as a textual witness to events both earth-shattering as well as banal, from Iraqi battlefields to Hollywood gossip. Increasingly seen as the raw truth, blogs have started to pull the mainstream media around by the nose, as it outscops and out-maneuvers the slower moving journalistic institutions.

Though the speed at which bloggers post their comments often sacrifices fact-checking, the proven reliability of many blogs has proven disastrous to official spin-meisters, censors and those who prefer to control the flow of information.

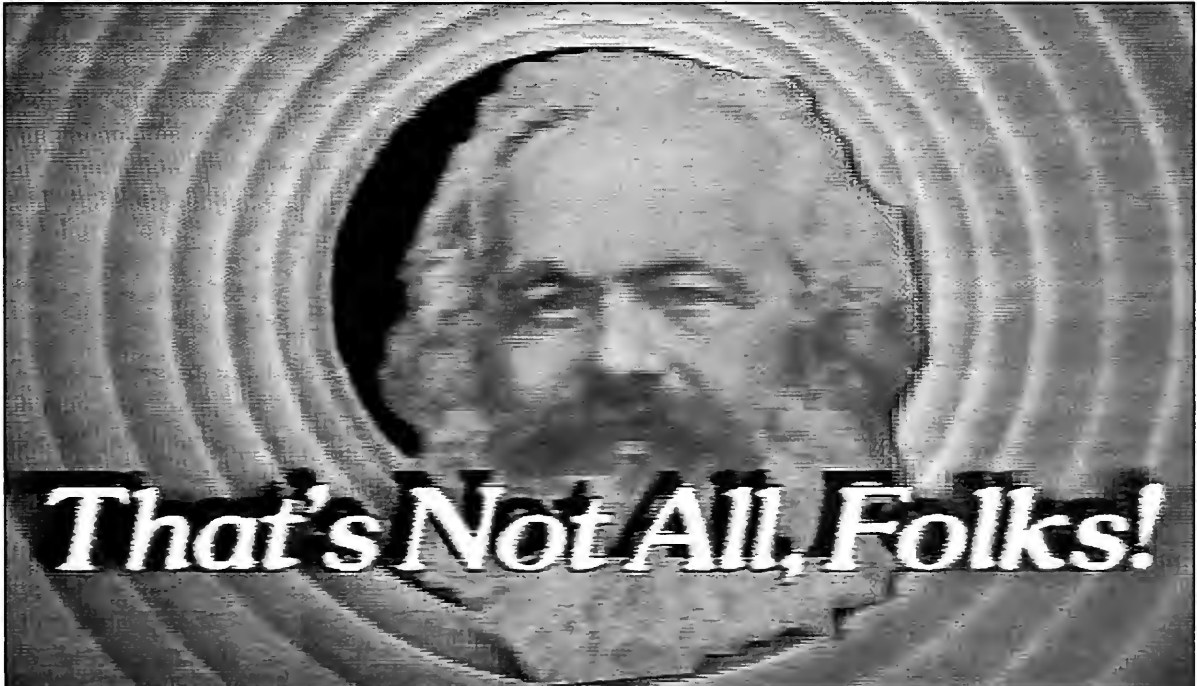


frame from Phil Pateris' Iraq Campaign

### The Way Forward

Ultimately, what is the impact of such activities? While some pundits like to dismiss it all as the trivial work of isolated individuals, I believe that the total effect of technopranks is having a substantial impact on public life, with benefits ranging from opening up raw documents directly to the public, to questioning and satirizing powerful interests, to deflating the omnipotent power of corporations and government, to building horizontal links between millions of people. Information, however, is not necessarily power, but must somehow be translated into action. That is the challenge of our age. **PW**

- 1 Atwood, M. (1986). *The Handmaid's Tale*. NY: Anchor Books, p. 52.
- 2 Huxley, A. (1965.) *Brave New World Revisited*. NY: Harper Row, p. 29.
- 3 Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley: University of California, p. 247.



frame from Jesse Drew Manifestoon

# A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES AT 45 WESTPOINT

HOMELESS FAMILIES AND THEIR FRIENDS PROVIDE A GLIMPSE  
OF WHAT A REALLY GOOD LEFT COULD LOOK LIKE.

James Tracy

**T**HANKSGIVING MORNING 2003. At the intersection of 30th and Mission an odd assortment of humanity gathered—even by San Franciscan standards. Homeless families, most with strollers in tow, cautiously mingled with trade union activists. College students tried out their Spanish on Latino day laborers. Street punks, checked out the non-profit workers with a sneer that acknowledged “I’ll probably be you one day.” The crowd of about 140 had diversity written all over it—elderly and young, and enough ethnicity to make even the most jaded observer speak about Rainbow Coalitions as if the idea was just invented five minutes ago.

Protest signs handed out casually read “Let Us In!” below a cartoon of a global village angry mob. The mood remained mellow, maybe strangely so for a group of people who, in an hour’s time would be participating in an illegal takeover of vacant housing; one unit among thousands owned by the San Francisco Housing Authority—the often troubled agency that is charged with providing homes for the city’s most impoverished.

Announcements are made: the bus chartered to bring the protesters to the secret takeover site is late, but will arrive shortly. The driver of the bus had been reached by cell phone and reported a

hangover from which he’d just woken up. He would be stopping for a strong cup of coffee. Even on Thanksgiving Day, there was more than one protest going on in San Francisco. A couple of hundred feet away, United Food and Commercial Workers members picketed Safeway in the ongoing battle over the company’s attempts to do away with healthcare benefits. A delegation went over to wish the unionists well as one nervous housing protester tried to conceal the Safeway logo on her fresh cup of coffee.

The press showed up early to search for a spokesperson, played today by Carrie Goodspeed, a twenty-four-year-old community organizer with Family Rights and Dignity (FRD), part of the Coalition On Homelessness. She’s nervous at first but then relaxes. “The Authority owns over one thousand units of vacant housing that could be used to house families. We will risk arrest to make this point.”

“Is this the right thing to do?” blurted one reporter. There’s silence and an expression on Goodspeed’s face of someone with second thoughts. Suddenly that expression disappears.

“Definitely. It’s the right thing to do.”

**TAKEOVER!** The caravan consisting of five autos, some bikes and the long-awaited bus arrived at the tip of the West Point Housing Development. Banners in the windows proclaim: “HOMES NOT JAILS FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES,” and “THESE UNITS SIT VACANT WHILE FAMILIES SLEEP ON THE STREETS.” The dwelling was opened up the night before by a team of members of FRD, Homes Not Jails (HNJ), and



PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE BY JOSEPH SMOOKE

other assorted individuals. Some were there to pressure the SFHA into rehabilitating the vacant units and have a very politically correct Thanksgiving. Homeless people added another thoroughly practical aspect: "If I get busted, I sleep inside. If I don't, I sleep inside," one person remarked.

A speakout commenced in front of the building. Camila Watson, a resident of the development took the microphone. Watson is one of the reasons this action landed here—due to her outreach most of the neighbors are reasonably supportive.

When Watson was homeless, she turned for help to Bianca Henry of FRD, one of the women occupying the apartment. Watson's name had "disappeared" from the SFHA's waiting list. Extremely aggressive advocacy on Henry's part, coupled with a clever media event the previous year, had helped the agency to "find" Watson and offer her a place to live.

"I used to come by here and think 'Why can't I live in apartment 41, or 45, or 47. Give me paint and a hammer and I'll fix it up.'" With housing, other good things have come to pass. Watson now holds down a job, and is doing well at City College. The experience left her determined to fight for those still stuck in the shelter system.

"They say these units are vacant because people don't want to live here. I haven't met a mother yet that wouldn't move here over the streets and the shelter."

Another woman told a story of how her homelessness began the day the government demolished the public housing development she lived in, and reneged on promises for replacement housing for all tenants. One resident remarked how she feared taking homeless family members into her home, since her contract with the SFHA made that act of compassion an evictable offense. A young poet named Puff spoke in a style that was equal parts poetry slam, evangelical and comical. By the end of her microphone time she managed to connect homelessness, minimum-wage work, consumerism, police abuse, war and genocide. From someone with less passion and less street experience, it might have been indulgent. From Puff, it was a clear-eyed ghetto manifesto, and a call to arms.

The San Francisco Labor Chorus rallied the group in rousing renditions of post-revolutionary holiday favorites such as "Budget La-La-Land," stretched to fit "Winter Wonderland," and "Share the Dough," set to the tune of "Let It Snow". At first the very white group of trade unionists seemed a little out of place in the projects.

As many neighbors stopped by, a trio of young men came down the hill.

"Is that where the homeless people are going to live?" the tallest one asked.

"We hope so!" yelled Bianca Henry from the second floor window.

"How many rooms?"

"Three!" Henry replied.

The youngest looking of the three flashed a smile gleaming with gold caps "Happy Thanksgiving, yo!" as the trio con-



tinued down the hill.

### The San Francisco Housing Authority and Hope VI

Life as San Francisco's largest landlord and last line of defense against homelessness has never been easy. Born in 1940, the agency initially housed returning servicemen and their families. Over the years, it has grown to operate over 6,575 units of housing and administer another 10,000 units in conjunction with other providers.

In the 1980s then-Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp announced the creation of the Housing Opportunities For People Everywhere (HOPE) program that would tear down public housing and rebuild it. HOPE was intended to get the feds out of housing provision by transferring ownership to resident cooperatives. President Clinton took most of the hope out of the HOPE program (now called HOPE VI) when requirements for resident participation, return, and unit replacement were stricken from the federal record.

In San Francisco the HOPE VI program produced very mixed results. When it worked, it worked because tenant organizations forced it to work. Some developments lost units and the agency's own numbers show that not every former tenant made it back to their former neighborhood. Many residents, some who lived through the "urban removal," of the 1960s saw the demolition as one more attempt to kick Blacks out of town. It was widely believed that then Executive Director Ronnie Davis gave free reign to his staff to evict out-

spoken tenants, forge documents, and take bribes. Davis was never convicted of any wrongdoing while in San Francisco, but was convicted of embezzling from his former job—the Cayahuga Housing Authority in Cleveland, Ohio.

Today, the SFHA is led by Gregg Fortner, who is regarded by most as honest, if a bit inaccessible. Continued federal funding cuts have kept vacated units vacant—about 905 vacant units or 16%, total. To meet the deficit in operating costs, the agency requested proposals from both for-profit and nonprofit developers to redevelop eighteen properties—again raising the specter of displacement—dubbed “The Plan” by activists and residents.

### This Town is Headed for a Ghost Town?

Ted Gullicksen, a co-founder of HNJ, knows how to use a bullhorn. Speaking from the broken window he invites the press and anyone else to check out the apartment. “It won’t take thousands of dollars to fix it up.”

Gullicksen, a working-class Bostonian helped to create HNJ to add a direct action complement to the San Francisco Tenants Union, which he directs. HNJ helps several “survival squats” (buildings seized for shelter not protest) in San Francisco. 45 Westpoint is a “political squat” used to protest the housing crisis, popularize demands, and generally raise a ruckus.

This ruckus is usually raised on major holidays, especially the very cold ones. San Francisco’s press is usually quick to broadcast sensationalistic stories about homeless people using drugs or having mental health episodes in public places. Such “journalism” has played a major role in mustering public support for punitive anti-homeless legislation.

On takeover days, the camera is forced to observe pictures of homeless people at their most powerful, not at their most vulnerable. Images of poor people and their allies repairing broken apartments replace one-dimensional images of addiction. HNJ specializes in the strategic use of a slow news day. Throughout the day facts, figures and theories on homelessness are thrown about, yet one message remains constant: “Nothing about us, without us.”

What about the former residents of 45 Westpoint? What happened to them and who were they? The house holds a few clues. Stickers on the upstairs bedroom door read “Audrina loves Biz.” Judging from the demographic of the development, they were likely Black or Samoan. Large plastic “Little Tykes” toys left behind suggest a child, probably two. A sewing

machine, a conch shell and a broken entertainment center might be what’s left of a ruined family, but who knows?

What caused their exit? Maybe the family left in response to the gang turf wars that periodically erupt on the hill. They may have been recipients of the federal “One Strike Eviction,” Clinton’s Orwellian gift to public housing residents. “One Strike” passed in 1996, allowing eviction on hearsay for crimes committed by an acquaintance. Grandparents have been evicted for alleged crimes of grandchildren. A woman in Texas lost her home after calling the police to end a domestic violence incident in her unit.

### Beyond “Services”

Bianca Henry surveys the Thanksgiving rebellion with pride, a grin playing at her lips. This is the first time she has ever committed an act of non-violent direct action. For someone who was raised in the projects and knows first-hand the over-reaching arm of the law, the fact that she is purposely risking arrest for the cause is a small, but dramatic personal revolution.

Henry’s pride in her work as an organizer is evident throughout. The takeover is part of an ongoing campaign to force the SFHA to house and respect families. Together with other parents, she has done one of the hardest things a community organizer can do: inspire poor people to move beyond “Case Management,” and “Services,” and take things to the next level: collective action, risky, scary, but potentially wonderful.

By design, the action is separated into two zones: the Arrest Zone (inside the house) and the Safe Zone (on the grass outside). It assumes a social contract with the police to respect Arrest and Safe zones. Henry knows first-hand that even minor brushes with the law can bring the wrath of the

C.P.S., I.N.S., P.O.s and PDs and various other Big Brother-like institutions adept at tearing families apart.

Henry knows that if you want to get anything done, you can’t just wait for the next election. She might have been a Panther in the 1960s but there’s a pragmatic streak in her as well. She can effortlessly rattle off obscure public policy points and arcane aspects of the Code of Federal Regulations as they pertain to

#### THE HOMES NOT JAILS/FAMILY RIGHTS AND DIGNITY DEMANDS

1. Move homeless families into the occupied units immediately.
2. House 200 families in the vacant units by Christmas.
3. Allow homeless families to rehabilitate the housing in exchange to sweat equity rights to live in the housing.
4. Stop the sell off and hold hearings on The Plan.
5. Release the developer’s proposals immediately.
6. Build more truly affordable units—don’t reduce their number
7. Stop discrimination against homeless families.

housing poor people.

Starr Smith is Bianca’s co-organizer. A single mom who came to work with FRD when she was still homeless, she’s on the outside fielding questions and dealing with the dozens of unforeseen snafus cropping up by the minute. They make an interesting team. Henry grew up in the thick of gangs and her neighborhood was devastated by the crack cocaine industry. She

exemplifies the Tupac generation of young people who grew up in the era where every reform won during previous upheavals was being stripped away. Smith came of age following the Grateful Dead in the final days of Jerry Garcia. Both faced down long-prison sentences and have built the FRD's housing campaign from scratch. In many ways the eclectic crowd is a reflection of this partnership.

Later in the afternoon one neighbor the group forgot to outreach to is steaming pissed—the President of the Tenants Association. She confers with Jim Williams, Head of Security of the SFHA. He in turn, asks Jennifer Freidenbach of the Coalition On Homelessness, to please call the agency when the protest is over.

"We're not leaving, we're moving more people in." Freidenbach answers.

"Yeah right." Williams retorted.

"Really."

"Well...Why don't we have our legal people call yours?"

Within the next 24 hours, the San Francisco Police Department had indeed cleared 45 Westpoint and the other units that had been reclaimed. This "Autonomous Zone" was finished, but the world of possibilities opened through good old fashioned mutual aid and a crowbar remained.

## Rebuilding the Left One Block at a Time

"More often than not, reliance on voting in periodic elections has sidetracked them from the more powerful weapons of direct action. By engaging in the continuous struggle for justice and human welfare, workers will gain a realistic political education and cast the only ballot worth casting—the daily ballot for freedom for all."

—BAYARD RUSTIN *NEW SOUTH...OLD POLITICS*

After the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, Elizabeth Betita Martinez, wrote an influential essay entitled "Where Was the Color in Seattle?" Unfortunately, one never needs to ask that question about prisons, slum housing, and homeless shelters. These are some of the most integrated institutions in the United States. Nevertheless, the loosely dubbed "Global Justice Movement" and those actually at the receiving end of global injustice are usually separated by vast cultural, political, and economic spaces.

For a day or so in San Francisco, this wasn't the case.

In September 2003, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that over 34 million people lived in poverty inside the United States. This statistic should have annihilated prop-



aganda that the cause of poverty is personal pathology. In a more honest world, factors such as a shift towards a low-wage service sector, welfare reform and out-of-control military spending would replace such distractions as marital status and personality in discussions of homelessness.

It could be a very good time for economic justice organizing in this country. Yet, as elections near, actions such as housing takeovers remain isolated by the liberal Left—marginalized by the urgency to "Elect Anyone But Bush."

The women of Family Rights and Dignity and the squatters of Homes Not Jails aren't waiting for the next election. They embody a spirit of past movements, such as the Unemployed Workers' of the 1930s, which is rooted in the everyday needs of community members. They build direct democracy with crowbars as their ballots and vacant housing as their ballot boxes. Election strategies might occasionally produce short-term good—but survival politics outside of the formal legislative system are better at producing organizers from the ground-up. That builds movements without illusions—ready to rumble no matter a Bush or Kerry victory.

As an action initiated mostly by working-class women of color it also shows alliances can be built between America's different dissident factions. It begins with supporting self-organized actions such as this and respecting the fact the communities who find themselves under the boot of poverty need people to have their back—not to act as spokespeople for their cause. Despite gentrification spasms, the city functions in a way similar to factories of old: a place where people of disparate backgrounds can meet, find common grievances and hopefully common collective action.

*P.S. 45 Westpoint was made available to homeless families in late February 2004.*

PW

# FUCKED BY THE DILDO SHOP

Zoe Noe

“Every revolution evaporates and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy.”  
—FRANZ KAFKA

It's the eve of the annual planning meeting for the staff of Feelin' Groovy, America's favorite sex toy company—a worker-owned cooperative! A year ago, I was instrumental in helping plan the event. A year later I'm sitting on a California beach, soaking in the waning hours of sunshine, watching the dogwalkers and the kites fluttering in the brisk breeze. I won't be attending or helping to plan the annual meeting tomorrow because I no longer work there. How did this happen?

When I wrote part one of this odyssey through the revolving door of the job market (see “Lose Jobs Now, Ask Me How!” in *PW* #17), I began with the realization that “all jobs are temporary.” That is no less a truism today, although in recent years I have concentrated—even staked my employment hopes in enterprises that at least appeared to offer some semblance of a collective work environment.

I joined a neighborhood recycling center which had recently “collectivized” (see sidebar). The collective part was true in terms of staff having considerable latitude over day-to-day working conditions, but it was fundamentally limited in that we did not actually own the business. It was owned by the neighborhood council, and major decisions were made by the Board of that organization. We had all the frustration of the worst aspects of the collective experience—acrimonious, excruciating five-hour staff meetings—with very little of the actual control and none of the rewards of ownership. The worst problem was a fundamental schism between the collective and a faction within—led by the son of the man who founded the recycling center back in the seventies—who wanted to

bury the collective experiment. They eventually prevailed of course, with the help of the mostly spineless Board, and our collective was history, and the work experience became more regimented, etc.

I never imagined I would become a Macrobiotic cook—certainly one of my early restaurant managers, in firing me, advised me to try anything else—yet I worked for a number of years at an eccentric Macrobiotic restaurant owned by a gruff curmudgeon with tightwad tendencies, who nonetheless was hands off most of the time and in most ways we pretty much ran the place ourselves in a fairly anarchic fashion, and had lots of creative freedom. But we didn't own the joint; and however much it was evident that things generally ran much better when the owner wasn't there to fuck things up, still he would meddle often enough that the place could never really be the place we imagined it could be—and was, at moments—not to mention it was constantly losing money.

## A new career

I never imagined I would be selling sex toys for a living either, but in the summer of 1999 I landed a temp job working the reception desk for Feelin' Groovy Sex Toy Emporium, a company that did its part in the latter 20th century to help make masturbation a household word (along with its accessories). Surprisingly, the company was even a worker-owned co-op!

It was an accidental career choice, like so many I've experienced. I was jobless, returning from six months away, during the height of the dot com boom. I asked a friend if he knew anyone who was hiring—he forwarded me an email exchange from a woman friend of his who worked there, on the subject of whether they use temps, and whether they even hired men at a woman-owned company. Both answers were affirmative, and I put in a request to be added to their pool of temps, to be perhaps summoned whenever a plethora of boring data entry work accumulated.

I heard nothing for a couple of months, but then was surprised with a call one day from the office manager, asking if I could fill in mornings at the reception desk.



While training, I found that the company was actually between receptionists and was filling the position with temps while accepting applications for the permanent position. Both I and the other part-time temp decided to apply for the job—and since we were already trained in the basics by the time the interviews came around, they hired us both.

I actually lied during my interview and said “a few years” when asked how long I planned to work there. It wouldn’t look good to tell them that I was probably heading back to Florida after a few months, so I didn’t mention it. But then, once I was hired, with the possibility of benefits starting after three months, the new job started to seem pretty good to me, and I quietly decided not to return to Florida. It was a fun place to work, pretty easy, and I got to interact with all sorts of interesting people on a regular basis—not only our eclectic staff, but many sex industry luminaries who would cross my desk on any given day. Also, I was on track to become a co-owner of the company, which basically involved a series of co-op orientation classes, maintaining a satisfactory meeting attendance record and having a token ownership payment deducted from one’s paycheck over the course of a year.

I took being a co-op member quite seriously. Finally, here was a chance to achieve true worker’s self-determination, in a business that really was worker-owned! I got involved with various committees, helped mentor new hires into the co-op process, and even ran for the Board of Directors.

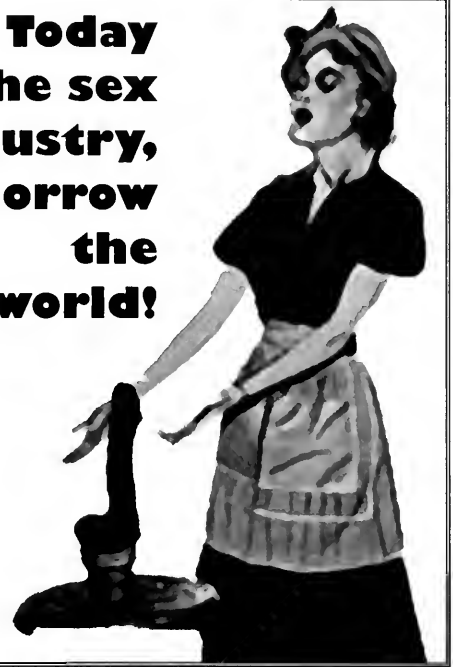
### About the cooperative

Feelin’ Groovy didn’t start out as a cooperative, but began as a sole woman proprietorship in the late seventies, an outgrowth of the feminist consciousness raising of that era. Much legend has attached itself to the story, but fact is she tapped into a substantial need for quality sex merchandising and education in a setting that wasn’t demeaning. By the early nineties she had a staff, and a mail order catalog as well, and sales continued to multiply. She sold the business to the staff, who formed a cooperative of 13 people or so—all women. The first man was hired in the mid-nineties. By the time I was hired, staff size had mushroomed upwards of 75 people.

The cooperative dynamic was different from businesses which had been formed as cooperatives or collectives. So-called *sex-positivity* was the common variable, and there was always a creative tension between those for whom being a co-op simply meant that the profits were shared and others who came into it with a lot of idealism about what it meant to be a co-op; that it implied a more horizontal authority structure. (That tension continues to exist today.)

Such exponential growth brought challenges to the coop-

**Today  
the sex  
industry,  
tomorrow  
the  
world!**



erative model that simply did not exist at other co-ops which were much smaller, or whose size had remained somewhat constant over the years. Fact was that, for all of its cooperative idealism, it always retained a fairly hierarchical authority structure, which only became more pronounced as the company increased in size, especially as we began to hire more from outside the company for certain specially-skilled positions high on the hierarchy food chain. The company would often give lip service to, but then usually gloss over, options of job sharing and skill mentoring.

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**Calling Feelin’ Groovy a “co-op” was similar to calling the United States a “democracy”: it was mainly window dressing to add legitimacy to management decisions.**

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Managers regularly complained about having decisions micromanaged, often by people who worked in other departments. In the late nineties the membership approved a far-reaching proposal that would give managers much more latitude to make decisions unchallenged. Formally separate realms were established within the company: “Operations” which meant the realm of managers to conduct day to day decisions about the functioning of the business, and “Governance” which meant the “co-op” and the issues that the workers were allowed to have a voice in. Issues pertaining to the “co-op” became relegated to a status kind of like being involved in after-school extracurricular activities; sort of noble, and you were often given kudos for doing so, but increasingly they tended to occur a pretty safe distance from the actual governance of the company.

I think many of the workers at the time voted for those

proposals without really grasping the far-reaching implications of what they were approving, or how much they were giving up. For it led to a general state of affairs in which the management team made all the really important decisions, with the “governance” side of the company often acting as a rubber stamp to management decisions at tightly scripted general membership meetings where there wasn’t much room for controversy, and at which the really important decisions were usually not in play. Calling Feelin’ Groovy a “cooperative” was similar to calling the United States a “democracy”: it was mainly window dressing to add a kind of legitimacy to management decisions, by being approved by the group at large. This trend within the co-op was further accelerated after the crisis to the business following 9/11, when our managers were trusted to steer the ship, and many of the interesting things that made the co-op a co-op were jettisoned for not being cost-effective. Just like in the real world.

### The day that changed dildo sales forever

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 shattered the illusion that ours was a recession-proof business. We were always amazed by the phenomenal success of the business; every year we would show 15-25% growth almost despite ourselves. Our revenue took a serious hit in the aftermath of the attacks—our retail stores took a big tumble as many people cancelled their vacation plans, and we suddenly discovered just how dependent on tourist traffic we really were. Our mail order division also took a big hit with the anthrax scare. All of a sudden we faced layoffs for the first time in the history of the company. I was amazed that the reception job survived this period, as mine was not one of the jobs eliminated. Many recently hired retail staff were laid off however, and I found myself in the strange situation of training to fill in shifts at the stores.

Along with the reality of layoffs, the culture of our cooperative received a serious blow, as many of the committees and classes and meetings were deemed peripheral to the survival of the business. A great deal of power was consolidated in the hands of management at this time: most people in the company were scared; just wanting to keep our jobs. Indeed, we were in many ways a microcosm of the national mood at that time; that our survival was in

jeopardy, and people were willing to trust that our leaders knew best.

Later—once the business stabilized somewhat away from the brink of dire emergency, and the more normal mistrust (between management and front line staff) had room to reassert itself—there arose a pretty substantial backlash to the concentration of authority in the company, but mostly it played itself out in the form of impotent grumbling, an occasional flame at a general membership meeting, but never resulted in any serious challenge to the corporate order. Occasionally, certain disgruntled floor staff were able to ride the backlash to elected seats on the board, but usually within six months on the board those same individuals could be found conforming to the management line about the sacrifices required in order for profitability to happen.

### A hostile takeover

Anyway, propelled by my enthusiasm for the co-op, I applied for, and was hired as the Secretary to the Board of Directors, which meant taking minutes at Board meetings, as well as being the one to oversee whether everyone was keeping up with their ownership duties.

The co-op part of the business took pride in the fact that we adhered to a reasonable pay ratio between highest and lowest paid employees. At the time I was hired, the differential was 3 to 1; sometime during the past few years the co-op voted to change it to 4:1. (According to Equal Exchange’s web site, based on *Business Week*’s 2000 annual survey of American corporations the ratio between typical CEO pay and that of average workers is 475 to 1!) Management was often maneu-



vering to increase the ratio, claiming that it was difficult to attract qualified management personnel for the wages we were able to offer. During this time, the Board and management were working hard on overhauling the company's compensation policy.

After months and numerous drafts, a completed compensation policy was sent to the Board for approval. The Board passed it, but many staff were unhappy about it; particularly with the provisions which would greatly reduce annual seniority wage increases, and also with the timing: the completed policy was presented to the membership and then Board was scheduled to vote on it the following day!

A group of retail staff, in an effort to keep the new policy from being railroaded through, organized a special meeting of the cooperative in order to veto the Board decision. It was unsuccessful, as most members voted to uphold the new policy. But in the week leading up to the special meeting there was much confusion regarding exactly how many votes were needed to veto a Board decision, since it had never been attempted before. The Bylaws were vague on this topic, and many members—including several Board members—were consulting me in my role as Secretary for a definitive answer.

I used simple logic in figuring out the threshold for a veto, but it turns out my logic was not simple enough. My answer was at odds with the president of the board, who said it was one greater than the number I came up with, which was certainly open to interpretation, and hardly mattered anyway as it was not expected to be a close vote at all. But after the phone call where the board president called me to reassert her interpretation, I knew I was fucked.

Several days later, as I was seated at the reception desk, someone came up to me with a stack of papers she'd found in the restroom, and asked if I could figure out who they might belong to. It was a stack of printed-out emails, left behind by a board member, and I recognized the same blizzard of emails I'd been involved in previously. But there was one added that I had not seen before, from the board president to the other board members, stressing that they needed to get rid of me as Secretary (as I had already been duly warned never to disagree publicly with board members in my role as Secretary), and that there would be a closed door discussion about it at the next board meeting. I was clearly not meant to see that email, but I decided to beat them to the punch, and wrote my resignation letter, and presented it to them at the beginning of the next board meeting, and gave four weeks notice.

My satisfaction was short-lived however. In a seemingly unrelated turn of events, I was summoned the next day to the General Manager's office, where I was told that my reception job was being eliminated at the end of the month. I was offered part-time hours at one of the retail stores, and after some consideration I decided to take it, even though I really didn't think I would do very well at retail.



### **Yes ma'am, humiliate me some more!**

I was often amazed at how I managed to get on the other side of the counter of a place that I wouldn't otherwise frequent—while meeting so many earnestly kinky young sex radicals who would do anything to have my job. Still, my first few months at the store were surprisingly fun as I was trained in the ins and outs of dildos, vibrators, erotic videos and books, condoms and lubes, light bondage gear, customer service, register skills, ridiculous novelty items, how to deal with unsavory customers (known as "wankers"), and the potential benefits and hazards of various materials (such as silicone, and the ubiquitous jelly rubber). My coworkers were lively, and I appreciated the change of pace; working as a team, compared with the office which was so compartmentalized. And for the most part I enjoyed having direct contact with the buying public (in my dual role as sales associate and occasional sex counselor). I enjoyed doing the actual front line work fulfilling the company's sex-positive mission, and proved more adept at it than I would have thought possible.

Or so I thought. My illusion of comradely co-existence was rudely shattered nearly four months later, when I finally had my overdue mid-training performance evaluation with my supervisor and found that we had a serious mismatch of expectations. She had pages worth of minor infractions, which became major due to the sheer volume of them (many which I could have worked on much sooner if they had not been kept secret from me for so long). Heinous misdeeds such as asking too many questions (as training retail staff we were encouraged to ask questions, but apparently it was not okay; in my case it often came down to asking the wrong question



MARI TEPPEER

to the wrong person at the wrong time.), talking to people sometimes while they were on their break (*horrors!*), picking the wrong time apparently to explain something to a customer (or failing occasionally to take advantage of an opportunity to cross-sell a certain product). (Oh yeah, and lateness. Though once I found out I was officially in the doghouse, I was not late again!)

I was put on probation, with a month to basically clean up my act, and request any additional training I might think I'd need. I pretty much gave up on asking questions altogether, for fear I might step on some toes. It became increasingly obvious that many of my coworkers were spying on me—and that many of them would run to my supervisor to complain instead of just bringing it up to me. Which provided

some real gems at my probationary check-in a month later. I thought I'd been really making some improvements, but my supervisor came in with pages more of infractions against me. Such as putting deposit slips in plastic ziplock bags even when there were no coins in the deposit. Or (*gasp!*) taking a little too long to gift wrap a purchase. Or being unduly generous in offering to fill in for people at the other stores who were calling me almost daily begging me to cover shifts for them.

By this point I was begging my managers and HR to let me give up my cherished status as an "owner" of this great establishment, let me just be an on-call flex person at the other retail stores. That way everyone will be happy; people will be thrilled to get their shifts covered, and you guys will be spared having to answer the wrong questions at the wrong moments. But because I was on probation, I wasn't allowed any flexibility over where I could work at all. Isn't being part of a cooperative wonderful?

I was given an ultimatum of no more than two infractions in the coming month, which I unfortunately wasn't able to overcome, especially now that coworkers at the other stores I filled in at were also spying on me; reporting such grievous offenses as taking a long time to complete a downtime task, or being in the wrong section of the store at a certain given moment. My supervisor deftly ambushed me one afternoon, cheerfully suggesting we could step outside for a little check-in, and casually shooting the shit with me on the way out there, where the store and HR managers were waiting for me with my last check in hand.

At Feelin' Groovy, we often prided ourselves on navigating uncharted territory—being a sex toy company the size we were while remaining worker owned and operated—but I wonder if the sheer size of the group is fundamentally incompatible with the co-op experiment. Other pressures have to do with the fact that, despite the universal need for non-judgmental sex information and quality sex accessories, our revenue was essentially reliant on selling luxury items—there's only so many Rabbit Pearls or Hitachi Magic Wands the average person could need. (It's not like co-op natural foods store with a regular customer base that can be counted on to come in and buy their organic rice and veggies every week.)

It's remarkable to me how an organization with an oft-expressed commitment to "diversity" can result in such a cookie-cutter approach to sales staff. And how such creative

free speech enthusiasts can end up creating a work atmosphere where people are afraid to speak their mind about the subject of work—and where it gets more likely to be fired for the crime of just wanting to be a human being while at work.

I feel for many of those who are still there, who tell me how morale is at an all-time low, with everyone—even veterans of over ten years—fearful that they will be the next ones to get the axe. I may have exchanged some relative certainty for an additional degree of precariousness, but I don't miss the impending

betrayal and humiliation. Nor do I miss being expected to sell an increasing array of cheesy gag gifts aimed at suburban bachelorettes with loose wallets in order to meet the bottom line. How sad that “sex-positive” would come to this!

PW



## “GOODBYE KITTY”

I knew it was an exciting fashion moment when I looked at the full-page Macy's ad in the paper, which featured full-body catsuits in luxuriant velour. Not my usual style, but I was especially enticed by the black & white leopard print variety. “I have to have that!” I remarked to my co-workers at the restaurant.

They didn't have my size at Macy's (I'm a big guy; tall and slender), but I shopped around, and found one at a boutique on Haight Street that fit me pretty well. I wore it at all three of my part-time jobs. Customers at the Macrobiotic restaurant were amused, slightly titillated, but took it in stride, quite used to the eccentric staff. People barely raised an eyebrow when I wore it at the gay newspaper where I worked as a production assistant. I had no reason to imagine they wouldn't be similarly blasé at the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood recycling center where my commitment was dwindling anyway.

I had worked at the recycling center for five years, much of it enjoyable (see my tale of toil, “There Goes the Neighborhood”, in *Processed World* issue #26/27), but it was a grimy job, our failed attempt at collectivization had taken its toll on me, and I had recently moved across the Bay to Oakland, and was holding on to just one shift a week while I contemplated giving notice.

My remaining shift wasn't even at the yard, but helping staff a pilot program for recycling office paper at some of the large office buildings downtown. Since I was commuting from Oakland, I would just meet my co-workers at the loading dock of a certain building. They would drop off a truckload of empty barrels along with a handtruck, and my job was to visit all the offices we had contracted with, and exchange all our empty barrels for full ones, and bring them down to the loading dock.

I actually tried to give three-weeks notice, but it was denied by the assistant manager (who was in charge while our regular manager was out on paternity leave). For some petty, ridiculous reason that I never understood, he didn't trust me to train anyone else to take over my duties: I had to wait until the head of the office pickup program returned from a lengthy vacation before I could resign. This didn't sit well with me, and I wasn't sure yet how I would respond. Certainly, it was a discouraging reminder of how far workplace dynamics had fallen in the couple of years since we ceased formally being a collective.

One particular September morning (coincidentally the same day that would have been my last had I been allowed to give notice), I met my truck crew and received the barrels, then decided to change into the catsuit in the bathroom on the 41st floor before working my way down to the ground floor. As I made my way from floor to floor, I received quite an assortment of responses. Secretaries and receptionists loved it; it brightened their day, and was a welcome relief from the usual business drag. Senior stockbroker types also got a kick out of it, regarding me with slightly condescending smiles that nonetheless suggested that they too welcomed a sight that was a little out of the ordinary. It was the middle management types—who were still concerned with climbing the corporate ladder—who couldn't handle it.

On the 29th floor, middle-aged woman, her face as severe and ashen grey as her power suit, confronted me, shaken, and told me that my attire was completely unacceptable, and that I must leave the building at once. I sidestepped her and boarded the freight elevator amused with how uptight some people are. When I got to the loading dock though, a security guard was waiting for me, and refused to let me even unload the full barrels of paper from the freight elevator, insisting only that I leave the building at once. I said “fine, you get to unload the freight elevator then!”.

Once outside of the building, I found a suitable location and changed back into street clothes, and took a lunch break. Then I slipped back into the building and quickly, quietly did the remaining floors (so that my co-workers wouldn't be stuck having to do it). I gathered all of the full barrels on the now unattended loading dock, and went home.

The next morning though, I received a phone call at home from the assistant manager, who was very angry and upset, saying that the phone had been ringing off the hook during my stunt, with calls from various offices that I had visited, complaining that my attire was inappropriate and left very little to the imagination. (He said one of the callers said they could “see everything”.) In short, I was being fired. When pressed for comment from me, I just laughed and said, “Sayonara, I'm through!”

Several years later, I was in the Haight, and happened to pay a visit to the recycling center. A couple of my former co-workers were still there, and one of them introduced me to a young woman who had recently begun working there. When I told her my name, her eyes widened and she exclaimed, “Oh my God, are you the one who got fired for wearing the cat suit?!!” —ZN.

# NO NONSENSE

## ABOUT THE RADICAL SIMPLIFICATION OF LIFE IN TERRITORY 37

p.m.

### An interview

*"Mr Hug, so how do you feel after five years of ter.org37?"*

"Great. As you can see, the transformation has been a huge success. By the way, no mister, please, just hug."

*"OK, hug, where I'm from, territory 37, as you please to call it, is being accused of exaggerated egalitarianism and of a relapse into the crudest forms of planned economy."*

"I can understand that. But we only made egalitarian those aspects of life nobody cared about any more, and we only plan what's no fun if unplanned. We've left behind all those excitements about capitalism, socialism, state or market. We've organised everything reasonably and live for our hobbies now."

*"How would you define the basic principle of ter.org37?"*

"Life consists of organisation and decoration. Organisation must be efficient and be able to secure basic needs. Decoration is everything else: art, culture, parties, clothing-styles ... The better the org, the more is left for dec."

*"But it's exactly your clothing-style that looks extremely uniform-like..."*

"Come on! tex.org takes care of climatically adapted and ecologically sustainable basic clothing—everybody is free to add as much ind.dec as she pleases..."

*"I think you should explain this in detail."*

"Gladly. In each bas.org there is a tex.dep in the con.dep..."

*"I have to interrupt again. In territory 37 a rationalized language has been introduced, all words consisting of only two or three sounds. Territory is ter, textile is tex, depot is dep, consumption is con, basis bas etc. hug himself used to be called Hugentobler. These terms can form compounds by putting a dot in between. They're also used on the ter.net. But perhaps we should begin again with bas.org."*

"Yes, let's try to be systematic. All ter.ind are organised in bas.org of about 500 ind."

*"An ind is an individual..."*

"Right, not an Indian! Incidentally, there are quite a few Indians in our ter."

*"ind.ind?"*

"Not quite. I assume India would comprise about 100 ter, let's say numbers 345 to 457. An Indian could e.g. be a ter.389.ind. However it would be more convenient for her to introduce herself with her glo.num."

*"glo.num?"*

"The global identification number. It's generated by a random program and assigned to every ind on the planet. I'm 037 04 256 100 227. 27 for my friends."

*"You seem to be fascinated by abbreviations and figures..."*

"Fascination is hardly the right word. It's all about avoiding redundancy, about an ecological use of signs, words, numbers to save paper, natural fibers and all substances used to carry data. It's about res.eff."

*"Resources efficiency!"*

"Congratulations! Additionally glo.num makes it possible not to register all other personal data like sex, name, religion, marital status, nationality, parents etc. Everybody can choose or change her name as she pleases. All the contracts with other inds—including marriage—are private. You can have children, change your sex, style yourself as a !Kong—glo.num doesn't know. In fact glo.num assures a perfect protection of privacy."

*"Back to the systematic explanation of ter.org. You began with bas.org..."*

"Right. bas.org is our everyday type of organisation, a new, simple, extended household. It's small enough for all bas.ind to know each other, but still big enough to avoid that sticky social intimacy. Above all it's very efficient in all aspects of logistics. Firstly bas.ind live in compact, perfectly insulated zero-energy buildings, typically eight stories high and 100 meters long, 20 meters wide. These bas.dom palaces have elevators, but if necessary you still can reach the upper floors on foot—consider the stairs as a kind of integrated work-out-center. Most bas.dom are built around an inner yard, where the children play, where there is a swimming-pool, half in-door, half out-door, where activities of all kinds occur—soc.dec! The ground floor is usually reserved for infrastructure services: a central kitchen, depots, a big laundry, several saloons, dining halls, cafes, bars, a kindergarten, media-saloons, workshops—life!"

*"So all inds are forced to have their meals together in big*

dining-halls..."

"Why? That would be unbearable. No, res.eff in the food-sector is guaranteed by preparing a varied, seasonally adapted a-la-carte offer in a state-of-the-art restaurant kitchen. bas.ind can choose, if they want to eat together in social combinations of their liking, or if they prefer to have the food catered to their family, community or single ind.ap."

*"So inds are not supposed to do any cooking in their apartments?"*

"They may. I personally would prefer not to use up my res.quot with energy-intensive cooking, but I'd rather invest it in an ocean cruise or a flight to Brasil."

*"Aha. This extreme control fetishism again..."*

"Just hold it! There is only one planet and all glo.ind are entitled to the same share of its resources."

*"That's entirely correct. We all agree on that, but..."*

"... nobody takes action accordingly. We say: every ind is entitled to an energy-equivalent of 500 Watt per day. That's only about 20 times less than the actual 10'000 Watts in your country, that are ruining the eco-sphere. Other resources are allotted on the same principle. res.eff is accounted for by a personal resources account, res.quot. Of course, not everything we do can be monitored, but our res.pol are doing their best."

*"A resources police!"*

"We only have one planet—all means—even desperate ones—must be used to save it."

*"And I bet, all res.quot.s are registered in a central computer system..."*

(hug—alias 27—pulls a rainbow-colored credit card out of his jacket pocket.)

"This is our tot.inf card. Everything is registered on its memory chip: glo.num, lab.quot, mon.quot, blood-type, allergies, tex sizes. All this information is on ter.sys as well, but people seem to have a kind of nostalgic attachment to the credit card format..."

*"But this is dramatic: you've established the transparent citizen!"*

"Logically. I mean: whoever hasn't done anything evil has nothing to fear from full disclosure. Those who used to be against the fully transparent citizen were typically the same who had skeletons in their cellars. But tell me: how can a society function with full ecological and social efficiency if there are no data at its disposal?"

*"But your ter.org, the state, has full control over its citizens. This must lead to misuse of power on an unprecedented scale. Big eco-brother watching you..."*

"So be it. But sober up. Information doesn't mean con-

trol, knowledge doesn't produce power. These are purely ideological claims. Take power: you're a member of ter.ex, the territorial executive council. What does it mean? Power? Not at all: lots of meetings, a lot of paper work, all kinds of hassles. We've got difficulty finding candidates for administrative positions. What advantage should I get out of my job? Sure, the working time is accounted for on my lab.quot, but it hasn't got any influence on my res.quot, my 20 m² of living space..."

*"You happen to be a member of ter.ex."*

"Correct. I'm there for the No Nonsense party."

*"We were talking about bas.org..."*

"Right, we must proceed systematically. So, the bas.org take care of life in a basic sense, in fact it's a kind of package deal, as we used to have them in the holiday business. The difference is, that we're costumers and staff, taking turns. bas.org are mostly urban units, in the country they can also exist, less compact, may-be. Not to forget: each bas.org has 90 ha of land, somewhere in the reg.org, which provides a high level of self-sufficiency."

*"I can't understand this. Why don't you produce food on a large scale by the ter.org—why these archaic city/country-exchanges?"*

"Because industrial agriculture is not efficient. We've had to replace it by a new type of mixed cultivation to save the soil and to be independant of external energy supply. To achieve this intensive work by a lot of people is needed. Big units are no advantage in this form of agriculture. Periodical work on the bas.farm is also an aspect of soc.dec."

*"What was this again?"*

"Social decoration. Doing things together because it's fun. Agriculture cannot be run like the industry. Direct relationships between producers and consumers are essential to avoid scandals like BSE, MFD, antibiotics poisoning, generally loss of quality. bas.org are logistically ideal for this type of supply. And there is something like the love for the land: agriculture is closer to child-rearing than to industry. Looking after plants and animals. Evidently ter.org produces salt, sugar and oils industrially."

*"So there are no free farmers left, just these bas.org kolkhoses."*

"Farmers have never been independent—that would be a contradiction in itself. As any producer, they have to sell their produce to somebody and they're bound to be dependent from the buyers. The cooperation with bas.orgs was based on free contracts and it has proved to be much more profitable and enjoyable than being dependent on big supermarket chains. Most agr.orgs have now merged with their city counterparts into one household-unit: less stress for everybody involved, simpler accounting and faster help

in times of emergency.”

*“The first thing I noticed in ter.org: the uniform clothing, all natural beige or eggshell-white fabrics...”*

“Yes. In fact it was a deal with the other no-nonsense parties, which opted for different solutions. All ter.ind get the same clothing items from their tex.dep: natural, organically grown, non-colored cotton, linen, wool. You have your measures taken and every day you can collect your freshly washed and ironed set of clothing and sheets in your ground-floor depot. tex.inf is registered on your tot.inf card and you can get your size in any bas.org. There are underpants, socks, T-shirts, shirts, a very elegant jacket, a padded coat for the winter, women’s dresses etc. The set was designed by the best designers in the territory—after an open competition. The advantages are obvious: everything can be washed in big, energy-efficient washing-machines, nobody needs to store clothing or textiles in their flat, nobody needs to think of clothing at all and is free to enjoy any kind of dec-nonsense.”

*“But you can also have yours clothes tailored individually.”*

“Of course. But then you have to take care of this personally, and your res.eff might suffer. Almost nobody is into this anymore.”

*“But the general uniformity...”*

“Any kind of efficiency implies a certain level of monotony: mass production, economy of scale! No way around this. As you can see, it was exactly tex.org that has generated an explosion of ind.dec: people wear immense turbans, they decorate themselves with scarves, jewelery, especially gold, they tattoo themselves, grow beards, invent funny hairstyles...”

*“I can’t help noticing that you have had your nostrils pierced.”*

“Ironically tex.org is a big success. We’ve had to open shops in New York, Tokyo, London, Paris. tex.org clothing is one of our big export hits. Our ter.org CD-ROM is very popular, too.”

*“You mean: you’re exporting your social system?”*

“Sure, for free. ter.org, including pro.org and dis.org, calibrated to 10 million ind, can be loaded down and put into action by anybody, globally, as glo.org.”

*“Maybe here we have to supply a few infos on ter.org0: 10 million ind, 50’000 square kilometers—about the size of Belgium or Pennsylvania—, between 40° and 50° north or south, medium rainfalls...”*

“ter.org can be adapted to any climate, surface, or topographic condition. It’s a basic program for the planet.”

*“Okay, but we wanted to proceed systematically. We already have bas.org taking care of all everyday needs. And*

*beyond that?”*

“urb.org. Consisting of 20 bas.org, 10’000 ind, and providing, as its name suggests, the urban sphere for the ind. In bigger cities urb.org would be a neighborhood, a borough, in the country a small rural town.”

*“And there is nothing in between?”*

“Why should there be? Smaller settlements cannot provide a compact dom.org, would only spoil the countryside and take away land from the farmers. A real ind can only live in minimal urban surroundings. Man is an urban being, she degenerates in the country. A few villages and hamlets may have survived, but they’re not really part of ter.org.”

*“Just a moment: does this mean, that there are people in your ter.org, that do not fully belong to ter.org?”*

“Of course. ter.org is not totalitarian, it’s an offer. As a rule 10% of everything isn’t ter.org, but non.org, or even an.org. This was part of our coalition contract with the Some-Nonsense Party. Our more radical partner, the Absolutely-No-Nonsense party, was strictly against the 10% rule—they didn’t want any ter.mon and they wanted to reduce res.quot to 200 Watts.”

*“ter.mon?”*

“Territorial money in notes, so that it can circulate without being controlled by the central accounting computer.”

*“A kind of free market economy?”*

“Not really—not much more than pocket money. Our system is very simple: there is an ind.lab.quot, a number of hours you must work in a lifetime, at the moment it’s 27’086 hours, or 9.27602 years of eight-hour-days, without counting free days or vacations. Your tot.inf always tells you the individual state of the account. The equivalent of what you have there—allowing for a little over-draw—can be spent for goods in the dis.org, the organisation of distribution. But only, if your ind.res.quot agrees with it. To make the system a bit more flexible without compromising its efficiency it was decided that 10% of your lab.quot can be paid in ter.mon. This makes sense, especially for foreign visitors, who can change their dollars or euros into ter.mon and spend those in hotels, shops, trains etc.”

*“Sounds too good to be true. What happens if somebody just doesn’t want to work, or when you’re ill, handicapped, drug-dependent...”*

“Alright, lab.org is bit more complex than outlined above. What helps is a completely integrated, computerized labour market—as you would call it—of about 5 million able workers between 15 and 70. This means, that it’s no problem to find a suitable job, even on short notice. If necessary, you can get an extra res.quot bonus for additional mobility needed to get to your job. Moving to another

bas.org is extremely easy: just pack a bag with some personal belongings, and off you go: no furniture, no clothing, no pots and plates! Each bas.org keeps a reserve of 10% of space to facilitate this kind of mobility. When they're full, you go to urb.org. If you're ill, a replacement is easy to find. The handicapped, of course, can get work according to their abilities and a reduced vit.lab.quot. Additional flexibility derives from the fact, that each ind can spread or concentrate her nine years of work according to her wishes. You work a year, take a break of a year, you work a month here and there, you take 20 hour work weeks, etc. If you go into training, this counts as work, too."

*"And if somebody works more than her lab.quot?"*

*"Then she can only get those 10% in ter.mon."*

*"The rest can be passed on to the heirs?"*

"No, when you die, all your accounts are frozen and stored—for ever. There is nothing to pass on, except a few personal items. A ter.ind doesn't really own anything, not even her clothes. We're basically poor, or free, it depends on how you see it."

*"And if somebody still doesn't want to work?"*

"You mean: the hard-core work refusers. We can't do much about it. She'll be approached by nice and understanding lab.funs—labour functionaries—who will counsel her and make her the best possible offers. There are a few guidelines, too. At the age of 30, you should have worked 30% of your lab.quot. We're not really ready to believe those, who promise to do all their lab.quot between 80 and 90, and pass on to other universes before they ever get there. And then there's also lab.dec: work conditions have improved greatly taking in account the relative autonomy of the workers—it's become really attractive to work. No stress, no speed-up, maximal safety, a good atmosphere."

*"And how have you organised your social security systems?"*

"There are none, of course. How could there be? bas.org takes care of all your needs, whether you work or not, when you're ill or old. In case of illness, just go to the med.dep, talk to a med.op or med.fun. As I said, we're an all inclusive offer."

*"med.op seems to be your term for a doctor..."*

"Exactly. There are also agr.op, mob.op, tex.op, dom.op, did.op, a lot of fun. of all kinds, and dec.ops!"

*"Artists!"*

*"Got it."*

*"And if someone still refuses to work, even after having been counselled by your persuasive lab.funs?"*

"Aha, you seem to be really concerned about free-riders. Now, even if you refuse work, you'll have to live somewhere, in a bas.org, and there will be people. They'll tell you, that they're not so happy with your behaviour. You move on to another bas.org—but there are phones, and word will get around... It is obvious, that social cooperation only works under the condition of functioning social communication, free-riders can only exist in relative anonymity. You need constant social feed-back, so that cooperative behaviour pays and defection doesn't. Read Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*."

*"So there is social control."*

"Yes—there's no way around it. Some work must be done. Now, if a non-worker has some charm, you can still define him as a dec.op or a phil.op. Or you can send her into politics. There's a lot of leeway. Don't forget that the introduction of ter.org reduced the overall economic activities to about 20% of what they were before, and also work. So there isn't really a very heavy work-load. But we definitely can't live on dec. alone."

*"Sounds very puritan to me."*

"It's still true—it's one of the flaws of this universe. A real challenge, too."

*"No paradise."*



"Not in this universe. But there are others..."

*"As a visitor I was allowed to enter lab.org on a temporary basis. It was rather awkward, I must say. At the border I had to check in at a ter.org office. Then you pay a 50 dollar deposit for each day you want to stay. This means you don't have to work, but you still have to keep within your res.quot. Then they take your fingerprints and scan your iris. You get issued your glo.num and your tot.inf card. In the next room, there's a tex.dep, where they take your measures and hand you over your clothing, depending on the season. You can have your old clothes stored. I must say, putting on the new clothes and seeing myself in a mirror was really fun. You suddenly look so ter.orgish. After that you're free to travel all over the ter37, have meals in any bas.org, find rooms in most of them. With your card you can consult the state of your quotes at any ter.net machine—a kind of ATM, which you find at any street corner. Everything is free. You can even enroll at lab.org and accumulate a little lab.quot. Usually it's some cleaning in a bas.dom, or some help in a kitchen. Upon your departure, your lab.quot is subtracted from your deposit and you get back the rest, or all of it, but never more, unfortunately."*

"That's because we don't want to exploit foreign workers. And what's the experience like for you?"

*"An eerie feeling of freedom. After the first shock of iris-control, all those questions in the ter.org office, the taking of measures, I mean. Suddenly I had time for a lot of things."*

"That's the point: no-nonsense org, so that more nonsense is possible. Sounds paradoxical, but such is life."

*"I had a big scare, though, when I realised, that I couldn't board a train, because my res.quot was empty. I was stranded in urb32, in the mountains."*

"You must have been travelling around too much. Yeah, the res.quot can play you some nasty tricks. Its handling requires some experience and foresight. You have to combat the instant-satisfaction-mentality, that puts such a stress on the resources. Most of us accumulate a res.quot reserve for emergencies, like a flight to Mexico, when you get your late-winter depression."

*"Thanks for your advice. Now, mobility is the topic."*

"mob.org. This means the ind on foot, and most of the rest of the trips by public bikes."

*"bic.org?"*

"Exactly. All of this puts no stress on the res.quot. We've got a somewhat reduced system of public transportation, so that every urb can be reached. These trips are charged to lab.quot and res.quot. Finally there's a territorial car-share organisation, aut.org, even lux.aut.org—Rolls Royce Silver Shadows, Maibachs, Ferraris, Chevrolets—for birthdays, existential crises and such—but these impinge on your quotes considerably."

*"No private cars?"*

"Theoretically possible, but such a burden, that you'd use up your whole res.quot just for this. You'd have to be a real automobile-freak."

*"So then, individual transportation is virtually no option..."*

"You can get wherever you want, maybe not as fast as before and not on short notice. Very few flights, only a few thousand kilometers of international train trips. Mobility is not a need in itself, but a function of the territorial lay-out of social systems. If work, living and entertainment are geographically separated, a lot of unenjoyable trips are necessary. Now, bas.org, urb.org and reg.org, optimized by ter.sys, allow for everyday functions being mostly within foot or bike distance. If you consume mobility, it should be for pleasure, like drives into the country, surprise visits to friends, or races on some of the remaining highways. Speed can't be replaced by anything else. Some people need it from time to time. This has nothing to do with old-time commuting. However the Absolutely-No Nonsense party wanted to scrap all cars..."

*"You always mention other parties. Does this mean, that you are a democracy?"*

"We're absolutely democratic. Everything is democratic, the bas.org have their elected bas.ex of 10 ind and a general assembly, bas.leg, of all bas.ind. urb.org have an urb.leg of 100 delegates and an urb.ex of 10 ind, the reg.org alike and in the whole ter.org there's a ter.leg of 100 representatives and ter.ex of 10..."

*"And nothing bigger than territories, no nations?"*

"Nothing bigger. We found out that bigger units are ecologically unsound and socially hazardous. I mean, nations have a very bad record of peacefulness."

*"A very rational approach, expressed also by your flag: just a natural-beige cotton cloth with the number 37 on it..."*

*"In a natural blue dye."*

*"What about emotions? National feelings..."*

"Rather not. We think the concept nation is somewhat childish, may be appropriate for adolescents. But we intend to grow up..."

*"What about justice?"*

"Yes—there's jur.org, an independently structured system of elected judges, up from urb.org to ter.org. The position of judges is very strong, they don't even have a lab.quot!"

*"And there's ter.pol, I presume."*

"Right. urb.pol, reg.pol, ter.pol. Excellent policemen, clever detectives... We are a pol.org."

*"The ideal police-state."*

"Exactly. However all police interventions, all sanctions, must always be supervised and decided by a judge or jury. You have the right to see a jur.op within an hour of your arrest."

*"Still, where I come from, the idea of a police-state doesn't seem particularly attractive."*

"You're right. I'm sorry. I tried to show off with my flippancy. There's really very little policing taking place around here. No shops to lift, no banks to hold up, everybody lodged and fed. No mass anonymity."

The term police is derived from the Greek word *polites*—which just means citizen. And that's what we do: everybody takes a two-week course in basic police work and then you can apply for shifts or are called in when it's necessary. There's no uniform—in fact we are already uniformed. You put on one of those fluorescent green vests over your tex with POLICE on them, and off you go. No weapons, no sticks, just a notebook. Your job just consists in politely reminding your co-citizens of their duties and to keep public spaces orderly and clean."

*"And what kind of sanctions would you face in ter.37?"*

"The Absolutely-No Nonsense party wanted to introduce a modified version of the islamic sharia: floggings, beheadings, public shaming etc. for ecological reasons, to save all those expenses for prisons. The Some-Nonsenses only wanted deductions from lab.quots and res.quots, according to the type of crime. Now we're somewhere in between. For non-violent crimes we use deductions—very handy, fast and cost-efficient—and it hurts. Violent perpetrators are sent to pun.bas.org, penitentiaries that are run like bas.org, just with a high wall around it."

*"There are certain similarities..."*

"To reduce costs. bas.pun.org are largely self-sufficient, you can call that practical resocialisation."

*"But no public floggings."*

*"It would have been bad soc.dec."*

*"The new, better ter.org human has not arisen, so far?"*

"No, we're all lazy, weak and wily bums. But we've decided not to let that pass. Alone we're weak, but under strong police supervision, we're strong. pol.dec!"

*"ter.org seems to be as democratic as one could wish. But*

*how did it come into being? Was there an eco-social coup?"*

"No, no, everything evolved in a democratically correct fashion. Proposition ter.org37 was submitted as a package to the electorate and we got a 52% vote in favour of it. There were some problems of transition, though. One of them was the neutralisation of all personal assets, and a uniformisation of the incomes..."

*"... the rich must have been on the barricades!"*

"Not at all. There was no expropriation, just an indefinite freezing. And we have par.sim."

*"Not again. All these abbreviations!"*

"It's very simple. All data on property, accounts and incomes, based on tax forms, was stored in a big simulation program, that is also taking in account the probable evolution of them, plus the career of the owners. Now, whenever I'm in a mood of it, I can consult ter.sys and see how I would have fared financially in the old system, if I would have become a CEO or a homeless, if I would be unemployed,

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**"And nothing bigger than territories, no nations?"**

**"Nothing bigger. We found out that bigger units are ecologically unsound and socially hazardous. I mean, nations have a very bad record of peacefulness."**

**"A very rational approach, expressed also by your flag: just a natural-beige cotton cloth with the number 37 on it..."**

**"In a natural blue dye."**

**"What about emotions? National feelings..."**

**"Rather not. We think the concept of *nation* is somewhat childish, may-be appropriate for adolescents. But we intend to grow up..."**

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sent to a war etc. Should ter.org be abolished one day, we could switch to par.sim and continue as before."

*"You seem to have learned from cases like East Germany."*

"They had a lot of problems finding all the records, there. So far, most ter.ind are rather shocked, when they take a look at par.sim."

*"Understandably. What you call simulation is the real plight that awaits me after this vacation.—Now, back to the early days of ter.org."*

"Another problem were the diverging views of the different parties. So, the definite ter.org was a product of coalition discussions between the three winning No Nonsense parties. The Absolutely-No-Nonsense party wanted to implant a tot.inf chip in our earlobes for total and easy control,



BERKELEY BART STATION. PHOTO BY ZOE NOE

everywhere. You just walk through electronic gates and all your quotes are monitored. The Some-Nonsense people were against electronic registration. Result: the tot.inf card! The Absolutists wanted to abolish the christian calendar and just count the hours after the start of ter.org., no days, no years! The Moderates wanted to introduce a ten-day week, a ten-month-year and two weeks of celebrations. No, we count the years since the start and number all days through the year, from 1 to 365 or 366. It's 5.251 today. Now, if some groups or whole communities prefer days or weeks or whatever, they can do that privately. Every group—think of religious communities—can establish their own holidays. Takes a lot of heat from intercultural relations. The Absolutists, abs, wanted to impose a compulsory, simplified, phonetic one-syllable language, mi.ko, of only two sounds per word, to save time and paper. The compromise: min.eng is only used in the system, everybody can speak the language she likes, additionally min.eng can be used just for fun."

*"Some fun."*

"The Absolutists wanted a military of 50,000, the Moderates of 100,000, now it's 75,000. The abs wanted to admit everybody with a lab.quot of a 1000 as a ter.ind, now you need 10 signatures from your bas.org as well—your godfathers/mothers, so to speak. You see, ter.org is already a compromise of three parties. But then there's also BTOS."

*"A new disease?"*

"No, our opposition party, back to the old system. For them we established par.sim, against the will of the abs, of course. BTOS now has 22% of the votes. There are a few splinter parties, the anarchists, who want to assign all public functions by the lot, the Fedorovian Progressists (FP), who want to raise the lab.quot every year by 10% so that we could build the quantum computer earlier, the BTB-movement, back-to-basics, that would like to go down to a res.quot of 10 and abolish electricity. Our coalition holds 65% of the seats in the ter.leg at the moment."

*"And there has been no counter-revolutionary movement*

*of the rich?"*

"No. Most of them only considered their wealth as a guarantee for comfort and security. ter.org offers both. Why confront all the hassles with shares, asset-managers, taxes..."

*"No more taxes?"*

"What for? There is no state, no economy, just a general logistic organisation, log.org. The ind enter their needs and wishes into ter.net, where they're processed and sent to pro.org and dis.org, which in turn figure out what's feasible with the lab.quot and res.quot at their disposal."

*"An ideal market economy."*

"Yes, but centrally organised and planned. And based on the principle of demand: only those goods are produced for which a demand has been established beforehand. There's no wasteful dumping of goods on an anonymous market. Nothing gets lost, no waste."

*"But not every wish is fulfilled."*

"Not even in ter37. However you still have 10% of non.org. Maybe you can find there, what couldn't be produced efficiently on a larger scale. There are markets in every urb.org and reg.org for specialties, jewelry, perfumes, spirits, paints, books, CDs, car parts."

*"The urb.org seems to be a kind of buffer system for the bas.orgs."*

"They represent a qualitatively different level of life and organisation. You find building materials there, all kinds of machines, a dentist, academies, cafes, dance halls. There's a certain anonymity, just shy of discommunication. Some call the urb.org dem.org, the democratic sphere in the sense of old Greek democracy. It's the stage for the citizen as a public figure, not as a household member, as in the bas.org. The same is even more obvious for a reg.org, typically an agro-urban region of between 200,000 and a million ind. Such a city would provide metropolitan structures and services like an opera house, public transportation, hospitals, interna-

tional meeting halls, a mundane city center. A ter.org consists of 10 reg.org."

*"Which makes the brave new world complete."*

"Not at all. A number of ter.org work together in a subcontinental framework, sub.org. Don't forget: no more big nations. But on a certain technological level—let's say electronics, chemical industry, vehicles, mechanical components, steel etc.—cooperation of ter.org on a broader scale is needed. Such sub.orgs could be West Asia, North America, South Asia, Oceania (Pacific area): wes.as.org, nor.am.org, sud.as.org, pas.org, etc. Unfortunately, we're still alone as ter37. Strictly speaking our days are counted, if other ter.org are not constituted very soon. As long as the rest of the world still clings to its archaic-dysfunctional organisation, we have to make compromises in many fields. We must produce for export, so that we can import certain needed resources. We can be blackmailed and are objectively exploited. That's why we have such a high lab.quot. Our costs are low, but we are not able to profit entirely from this—somehow we're a low-wage country. And there were incidents of political pressure..."

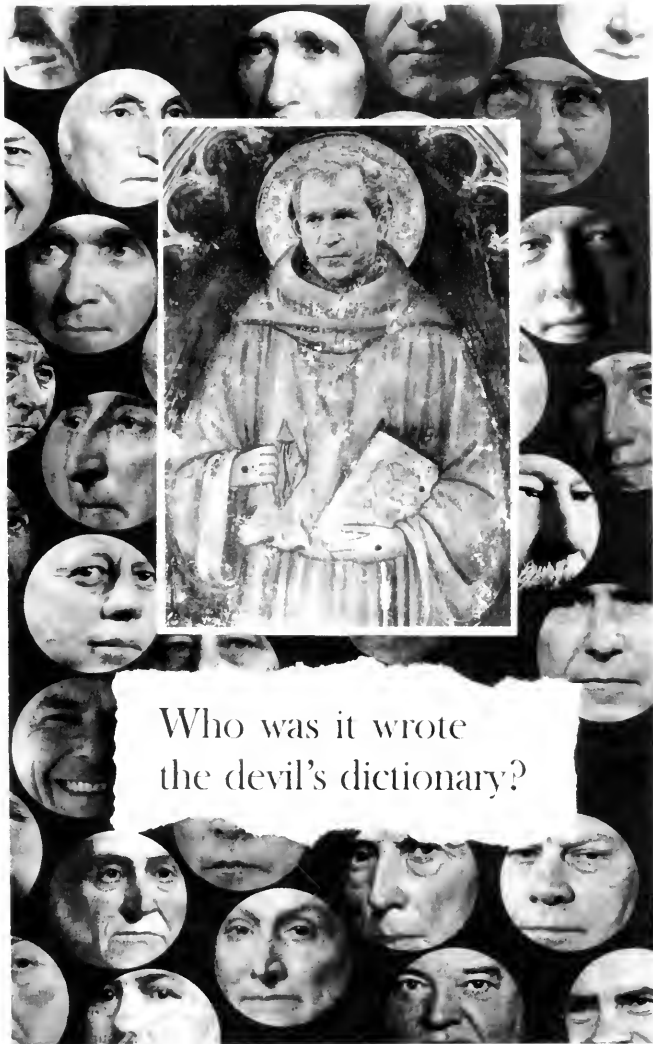
*"When President Hillary Clinton put you on the rogue states list."*

"We sent her a set of tex.org clothing and now she shows up in them everywhere. We can only hope, that ter.org is loaded down all over the planet and that more and more bas.org are founded. Very soon we should put the world on glo.par.sim. glo.org is ready."

*"glo.org! Sounds like the name of a monster. Are you really sure, that you've got the right answer to all the problems on this planet, to all the diversity..."*

"All I know is that we need such an answer. 80% of the people on this planet live below a decent mon.quot of 5000 dollars a year. 20% use up 80% of the planetary res.quot. There are hundreds of millions of angry young people with no perspective of a decent life. If there's no rational offer for these people, they will explode in some way. They can be manipulated by all kinds of demagogic leaders and cliques. We must choose between a just and ecologically sound glo.org or max.non.org—chaos, misery and war. The offer must come from those on the planet who—let's say—enjoy already more than 20'000 glo.mon (euros/dollars) a year and have a res.quot above 4000 Watt—there must be a transfer to the pauperised regions of the planet, to allow a transition to a sustainable life-style: glo.org. But this would not be a gift, it would mean paying back some of the profits since early colonialism. And glo.org would be the same for all of us, our common cause."

*"OK, I hear you. But what about cultural diversity? Isn't*



COLLAGE BY RAVEN

SPOKEN WORD/MUSIC OPERA/NO ONE TOLD TO SHUT UP.

*glo.org a product of typically western thinking? Are you serious, that you can just rationalise fundamenalist islamic, hindu or christian movements?"*

"glo.org has nothing to do with culture. As I said, dec is free: what you eat isn't defined by glo.org, just that you eat. glo.org doesn't tell anybody what to think, how to dress, who to marry, when to sleep, when to work. Of course you could say, that its strictly formal democratic system can get in conflict with traditional forms of government. It will also weaken the position of some men, because there is the 40%-rule: 40% of all ex, leg etc. must be either men or women. But then again, these so-called traditional forms of government have a very bad record. dem.org just makes sure, that all ind can participate in their common cause: the planet."

*"Everybody agrees with you on this. But isn't glo.org a bit too schematic for all the different situations on the planet. The idea of introducing your tot.inf card, your bas.orgs, lab.quot*

*etc. let's say in a country like the Congo, seems ridiculous. Couldn't there be simpler concepts..."*

"6 billion humans live on this planet. We're all hooked up to highly complex technological systems, all dependent on fast communication and efficient organisation. There is no Congo any more. We cannot fall back on supposedly simple systems. It's obvious that glo.org can only be started in highly organised areas, that have accumulated the appropriate resources. It's a reference model based on this type of societies. And then glo.org will allow these territories to shift a lot of the then superfluous resources to areas that had been deprived of them. glo.org is not an instant solution, but a plan to be put in action."

*"tex.org in the rain forest?"*

"I think non.tex is the most energy-efficient tex.org, and very uniform, too..."

*"And bas.org?"*

"Why not? Of course, in tropical climates you wouldn't need those compact eight-story buildings. But any village can be complemented with a few amenities and function as a bas.org. urb.org is very much needed in some of the chaotic urban spreads we see in Africa or Asia. Some railroads can be built, streets paved for bicycles, med.org established..."

*"What if some communities do not want to join glo.org?"*

"Then they can chose to be left alone. I'd still send some glo.funs there to make sure that this is the will of the people and not just of some traditional autocrats. I think the consciousness of being a global society has reached even the smallest villages. The need to have a voice in one's own affairs, public and private, and to get rid of patriarchal rules, whatever their legitimation ideologies might be, is felt everywhere, especially among the young and the women. There's no valid cultural argument against democracy. If people can not fully participate in their societies everywhere, we'll just see disruptive flows of migration, economic and cultural refugees, empty countrysides and overpopulated pseudo-cities. The planet is ready for glo.org."

*"Yes, but planned economies have failed everywhere. The world is just too diverse for such a schematic approach."*

"There have been no planned economies so far. There were a few attempts of mafias organized as parties and decaying themselves as communists or socialists to use state capitalist means to stabilize their hold on political power. No planning based on democratic input ever happened—what we saw was just command economy. In reality much more planning than ever took place in the Soviet Union, or let's just call it comprehensive logistics, is practised today by multinational companies. Some of them are bigger than many nation-states, have hundreds of thousands of employ-

ees, combine millions of components. And don't forget, that food supply is in the hands of the bas.org and needs no overall planning at all. Industrial production is now reduced to 20% of its former amount: almost no cars, no private machines, no supermarkets, simplified clothing. The exchange of goods on a glo.org level will be only about 10% of the actual world market. So, we're not talking of planning the existing over-sized global economy, but of rationalizing a small remainder of it."

*"So, all those villagers in the Congo can look forward to getting their tot.inf card?"*

"Yes, it's their ticket to the world society. We already produce billions of credit cards at the moment and, as I said, we don't even need the most advanced computers to run a few billion lab and res accounts. Of course, the basic infrastructure must be supplied to everybody."

*"And if the local war-lords oppose the new system?"*

"Then we have mil.org."

*"So you would send in troops to make sure that democracy is established?"*

"Why not—it has happened before. Think of the international brigades in Spain in 1936. National sovereignty cannot be invoked to protect dictatorial regimes. glo.mil, under the control of glo.leg, would be good news in many parts of the globe."

*"Unfortunately, the glo.mil we actually have is dependent on the US military and on the will of a lot of non-democratic nations in the UN that are run exactly by those autocrats, that should be ousted."*

"I'm aware of that. The situation is so bad, that you'd even prefer direct US-occupation to being oppressed by US-sponsored proxy-regimes. The real thing, so to speak. But the old system is being eroded from below. We'll have more and more territories instead of nations and one day, all the 600 of them will form the new glo.leg, which might or might not grow out of the UN. I think, that basic and territorial changes in the USA will play a pioneering role in this process. After all, bas.org and ter.org, dem.org, the idea of economical and ecological fairness expressed in lab and res.quot are old American ideals. You could say, that ter.org is a typically American idea."

*"A new avatar of the US-satan! All very rational, but what about religious and nationalist fanaticism..."*

"rel.dec! As much as you want. As long as your lab.quot is up-to-date, as long as you vote and respect the others, you can believe what you want. glo.org is no ideology, it's culturally neutral. I believe that so-called religious or nationalistic extremisms are mostly a quid pro quo, i.e. religious language is used to express a protest against economic or cultural exploitation. The "evil west" just stands for global capitalism.

On the other side, the “crazy islamic terrorist” is just a scarecrow to keep the workers in line in the west. For those, who really need a religion and want to get away from the old ones, we’re proposing glo.rel, a spiritual system, that uses few resources, no prayers needed, and is quite transcendental.”

*“You can’t be serious! Are you actually proposing a new global religion?”*

“Why not? It’s good to have some ideas about life after death and other issues, like the sense of life. glo.rel goes like this: the power of computing doubles every few years. The quantum computer, the next big leap, will allow simulations of manifold universes, including all individuals that ever lived, with all their personalities, memories, thoughts, perceptions. This huge computer will be able to simulate space and time, and, consequently, its own construction. Which means, that it must already have been built in some universe and that we live in one of its simulated universes. Every information on every quantum is available. You cannot die, nobody ever could. You just emerge in other universes, if you feel like it, and play other un.org.dec, as long as you want.”

*“Sounds like good news. Do you want us to believe this?”*

“No, it’s not believable, it’s scientifically the most probable and least contradictory explanation of the nature of our universe. Have you ever heard of Nikolai Fedorov?”

*“Is he your prophet?”*

“In a way. He lived in the late 19th century and demanded eternal life for every human being, including our dead brothers and sisters. This, he said, was the purpose of science and technology. He didn’t know about computers yet, he still believed in some god instead. Some of the founders of the Soviet Union were Fedorovians, including Tsiolkovski, the rocket-scientist. So, Fedorovianism was the implicit religion of the early Soviet Union. Later, of course, Stalin returned to the depressing christian-orthodox religion and called in the popes again. Now, we should all be Fedorovians: why die?

Why not play on in other universes? There’s no shortage of games: Middleearth, Dune, Earthsea, Anares... we’ll invent others and better ones. Everything is possible, for ever.”

*“But life is tragic.”*

“Who says that? Only those who daren’t be happy. We’re all so modest and say things like: eternal life wouldn’t be bearable, one life is more than enough, you gladly leave when you’re 95, we’ve all become dirty existentialists, minimalists ...”

*“You want to avoid disappointments.”*

“Then suicide is the solution. No further disappointments there. glo.rel is max.dec.rel. Everything else is not enough for us.”

*“But this is utter heresy...”*

“It’s the end of any possible heresy. The quantum computer I mentioned can be called god or allah by those who wish and the rest falls in place for them anyway. Hindus might want to consider their gods as sub-routines of the main simulation program—or not. Buddhists will feel relieved anyway: rebirth is not compulsory, or could even be enjoyable. Atheists are happy anyway. They always knew.”

*“Pray to Saint Nicolas Fedorov! If life is just a simulation and everybody can be sure to show up again in other universes—then nothing is serious. I mean, all the victims of recent massacres...”*

“If you take this universe seriously, you’re bound to be too scared to act any more.”

*“You seem to have thought about everything very carefully, from clean underwear to universal religion. Is there anything you haven’t thought of?”*

“No.”

*“OK, then, thanks for the interview, hug.”*

“gloorg!”

PW

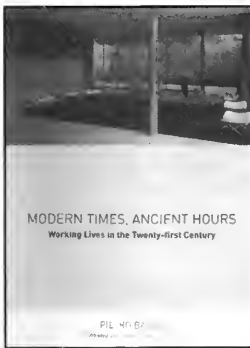
## min.eng

ac	academy	et	eternal	mon	monetary unit	rel	religion
af	Africa	ex	executive council	mut	mutual	res	resource
agr	agriculture	fem	feminine	net	network	sim	simulation
am	America	fun	functionary	non	non-	soc	social
ap	apartment	glo	global dimension	nor	north(ern)	sub	subcontinent
as	Asia	ind	individual	num	number	sud	south(ern)
aut	automobile	inf	information	op	operator, specialist	sys	system
bas	basic unit; 500 lnd	jur	juridical, justice	org	organisation	ter	territory
bic	bicycle	lab	labour	par	parallel	tex	textile
com	means of communication	leg	legislative council	pas	Pacific area	tot	total
con	consumption	log	logistics	phll	philosophy	un	universe
dec	decoration, fun	mach	machine	pol	police	urb	urban unit. 20 bas.org
dep	depot	mas	masculine	pos	position	vit	vital, life
did	didactic activities, learning	max	maximal	pro	production	wes	west(ern)
dis	distribution	med	medicine	psy	psychology		
dom	domicil, building	mld	mld-	pun	punitive	www.glo.org	5.251 pem
eff	efficiency	mil	military	quot	quota, account		
eng	English	min	minimal	reg	agro-urban region, 10-100 urb		
est	east(ern)	mob	mobility				

# STILL WORKING

## BOOK REVIEWS

**P**RODUCTIVITY" WILL ALWAYS BE A HOLY CANON for business. Even today when most wealth takes the form of speculation on speculation, obtaining the maximum labor effort from workers matters more than it ever did. No amount is ever enough. Pietro Basso's book details the human consequences of the work-house society: overtime, speed-ups, shift work, night work, on-call work, temp work, "accidents," ruined health and lives. Basso deftly deploys a mass of empirical data to show that working (and thus living) conditions are deteriorating universally. The importance of Basso's book is that he not only describes the horrors of modern work but attempts to explain the reasons for them. He does this by relating the increasing length and intensity of work to the nature of capitalism itself.



**Modern Times,  
Ancient Hours**

by **Pietro Basso**

London: Verso, 2003

reviewed by McDo.

It is an indication of the weakness of the working class today that Basso even has to argue for its *existence*—or, to put it more precisely, those who have no means of survival except the sale of their ability to work to those who stand to gain financially from it. He does this with feisty wit, desiccating the widespread fantasy spewed by academic charlatans that the working class is an antiquarian curio. In fact, Basso demonstrates that when viewed on a global scale the growth of industrial work has been a secularly increasing trend over time—and that today there are more industrial workers than ever before in history. The relative decrease in industrial work in “developed” nations is not evidence of salvation from a proletarian existence, but a consequence of the enormous increases in the productivity of labor and the consequent decrease in demand for living labor (exactly as predicted by a thinker whose name is more often invoked as a political signifier than his ideas bothered with, Karl Marx). The preponderance of service work in the developed world represents an amplification of capital’s command over labor, not its diminishment: service jobs are modeled on the principles of industrial work, not vice versa.

Basso connects the explosion in working hours—as well as work’s intensity—to profit making itself. Profit (or surplus-value) is nothing but the excess of money that emerges at the end of the circulation of capital. The magnitude of surplus-value depends on the quantity of surplus labor, which is the excess of the working day over the labor-time necessary for workers to produce a value equivalent to their wages. This is how workers are exploited; they produce more value than they are paid, and therefore a part of their working day produces surplus-value for capitalists for which they receive no equivalent. It follows from this that there is an inherent conflict between capital and labor over the length of the working day and over the intensity of labor, and that there is an inherent tendency toward technological change that reduces necessary labor-time.

According to the mythology of the economists, work time has been *decreasing* with the rise in the productivity of labor. Much of Basso’s argument is directed against this fallacy. He not only exhaustively shows that the opposite is the case—work time has increased or, at best, remained stationary in one or two countries—but shows that when the working day was successfully shortened (way back in 1918 and 1968) it was a result of class struggle by the working class—and not a gift from capital, as the economists would have you believe.

The labor process is designed to squeeze as much labor time as possible out of workers, so that workers in many modern factories—and offices—are forced to be in continuous motion for 59 seconds of every minute. This is way up from the average 45 seconds per minute of the classic assembly line of thirty years ago. Even as work performance is gauged by the minute—even by nanoseconds in today’s computer world—so also the length of what constitutes the social norm for working time has expanded. No longer based merely on the 8-hour *day*, work time is now calculated according to the week, the year, the lifetime. Basso exposes the economists’ swindle that time away from work has increased per lifetime because life expectancy in developed countries has more than doubled, raising the retirement age (though even this is being contested by capital’s political hirelings). This, of course, overlooks the fact that working

lives—the most vigorous years of life, not coincidentally—have doubled as well. And what exactly is a worker entitled to after having had nerves and muscles depleted in the service of another's wealth? A slow wait for death while being constantly reminded how expensive it is to maintain those who no longer contribute to the GNP.

Strangely, Basso's book, with its lost-in-translation title (it has nothing to do with ancients), is marketed as being about excessive working time when it deals comprehensively with all aspects of work under contemporary capitalism. For instance, Basso repeatedly points to the quality of work—its mad pace, its stultifying monotony, its corrosive stupidity, its degradation of sociability and spirit. The never-ending torment of wage labor is not just for the sheer sake of it—or because of the “work ethic”—but is linked to capital's need to valorize fixed capital expenditures by keeping plant and equipment running at all times, making the worker ever more servile to the pace and demands of machines. It is a measure of capitalism's strangulation of human progress that its enormous development of technology does not serve to alleviate burdensome toil but increases it.

No patron of ideological fashions, Basso validates the much-maligned “immiseration” thesis—which, contrary to received opinion, does not have to do solely with wages (real and/or nominal) or quantity of work time, but more broadly with the power relation between labor and capital. Workers have been made ever more dependent for their continued employment on the successful competitiveness of “their” particular firm, territory, or nation-state. The meaning of “flexibilization” is that the worker adapts to the economic cycle, facing overwork in periods of business expansion and unemployed desperation in recessions.

Basso brings out the true meaning of globalization. The book is organized to show the common experience of increased exploitation of workers around the world as workers everywhere are put in competition with each other. At the most glaring extreme, there is the example of 24-hour shifts in Vietnamese sugar factories. In the developed world, America's example of work overload—grown by an exponential five weeks a year over the last 30 years—has established the norm to beat for its rivals. Japan—which has a word for death by overwork—now looks like a slacker's haven by comparison. Elimination of legal limits to the working day are now being attempted in Europe, as

portended by last year's defeat of a strike for a shorter work week by the world's most powerful union, IG Metall in Germany. However, it is probable that the Bush administration's elimination of overtime pay requirements for all kinds of job classifications will keep the USA in the vanguard of cheap, super-productive workforces.

Of special interest is Basso's analysis of the 35-hour workweek in France that, contrary to the illusions of reformists, is anything but an exception to the trends he outlines. In fact, the 35 hour workweek has served to create more work—eliminating downtime, informal breaks, overtime pay, and introducing Saturday workdays—and not at all in the sense of its absurd promise to create jobs for the huge numbers of unemployed. The Aubry law indexes work time to the year—that's called “annualization”—rather than to the week, thus allowing employers to exploit existing workers in sluggish periods for, say, 30 hours a week while overexploiting them in periods of high demand for, say, 50 hours a week (supposedly *averaging* out to a 35-hour week!). It also greatly expands the category of part-time work. The whole plan re-

organizes the work process to enable French capital to compete on the basis of less investment in new technology with more effort (“productivity”) on the part of the workers. Most insidiously, implementation of the law is negotiated sector by sector, thus ending uniform social legislation that treats all workers equally, serving to divide workers against each other.

Although Basso does not explore this, French workers resisted the Aubry law (this is the subject of an excellent film, *Human Resources*). This is disappointing given that Basso optimistically predicts an eventual upsurge in working class resistance—in fact he claims the swell is mounting. Though this is sort of like predicting when the biosphere will collapse—what are the limits to unhindered exploitation?—it raises the question as to why the demand for shorter work time has not been on the working class's agenda for the last ... quarter century at least! One rather obvious reason is that overtime constitutes an important part of workers' efforts to make up for declining

wages. The threat of unemployment is another. Basso notes the alarming discovery of the American problem of “presentee-ism”—i.e., workers who refuse to leave the office—as domestic life in America is so alienated that work has become a refuge from it.

#### ON THE PRISONER ABUSE SCANDAL AT ABU GHRAIB

Rumsfeld blamed it on  
The Information Age  
He's right, the story had no legs  
as long as it was trapped  
in language  
on a page

Really, though, the photos  
may have come and gone—  
bloopers, eggs & apples (bad),  
wrist beslapped,  
goat bescaped,  
No Digital Device  
Beyond This Point

What tripped us up  
was being forced to wear  
the eyes of those who “hate  
us for our freedom”—  
to be their jailers,  
feel their pain,  
to overact but stay  
the bloody course.

—klipschutz

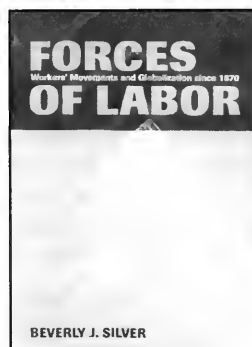
Although Basso demonstrates the total failure of social democrats and trade unions in Europe to shorten work time, he doesn't draw any political conclusions from this. When not arising organically from the working class's own struggles but is merely a demand with which leftist bureaucrats seek to lead the masses to a happy world of pro-worker capitalism, the effort to shorten the workday can be a trap. At best, French workers were asked to accept lower wages for shorter working time. Whose interests does this serve?

Although its appeal is rare among American capitalists, shortening work time as a political demand does have its adherents here. Take, for one example (there are others), the entirely virtual "movement" of Give Us Back Our Time, a public interest-type group enlisting liberal religious leaders, unionists and human rights petitioners to appeal to capital and the state to shorten exploitation to an extent that will allow workers to spend more time in church, with their families and communities. The literature of Give Us Back Our Time details the human costs to workers of the "time squeeze" but it bases its whole program on convincing capitalists that its in *their* interests to shorten work time. If workers work shorter hours, they can work them *harder*, thus enhancing the position of American capital in the global market! What these reformers really oppose is not the shortage of time for a life worth living but the shortage of profits.

Similarly, a recent MSN article deplored the shortage of vacation time for American workers—because it leads to higher health care costs for employers! It is not uncommon to see editorials and research papers pityingly shed a tear for the sad condition of workers today—wages have failed to keep up with productivity (shocking!); or: work time has failed to decrease with increased productivity (outrageous!). But this is a conjurer's trick: under capitalism, the point of increased productivity is not to give workers time off—unless, by "time off" is meant unemployment. The point is to save labor costs and gain a competitive position that allows the individual enterprise to accrue surplus profits above the average. Nor is the point of production to enable wages to rise, or for people to have better things; it is to make rich people lots of money. The delusion of economics is that capitalism is a system of meeting needs that rewards its participants with what they put into it: capitalists with profits, workers with wages.

The notion that wages and productivity should rise together—if unequally—formed the underlying principle of the post-WW2 wage bargain, codified in collective bargaining agreements. But just as collective bargaining and the "social wage" in that period served the needs of accumulation by providing capital with a predictable, regulated supply of workers and wage costs, so today economic growth—the "bottom line" of all social policy—demands that the costs of working class reproduction be pushed ever lower. This makes appeals to the common interests of workers and capitalists an exercise in nostalgia at best.

Maybe, as the French example shows, less work time is not as important as other aspects of flexibilization such as income insecurity. Maybe there are other demands with wider resonance, such as—given the truly torturous distances workers are forced into—paid commute time. No question, less work time would be an improvement—but not at the cost of decreased wages. It must not be forgotten that decreasing work time can never be an end in itself. At best, it's a defensive—if necessary—fight that repairs labor so that it might be able to go to work the next day. A fight solely to enable the working class to continue to function as a working class is ultimately not in the interests of the working class—their interest can only be the end of exploitation itself, not its shortening.



**Forces of Labor:  
Workers Movement and  
Globalization since 1870**

by Beverly Silver

Cambridge University Press,  
2003

reviewed by Chris Carlsson

**F**ORCES OF LABOR, IS A FASCINATING, if badly written, sociological approach to global labor unrest since 1870. Beverly Silver bases her study on data developed by the World Labor Group, of which she is a member. They have gone through back issues of the *NY Times* and *London Times* to find mentions of "labor unrest" since 1870, arguing that the two papers are the voices of their respective imperial centers and though they certainly do not record all instances of labor unrest, by charting the ebb and flow of such mentions, one derives a picture of global historical periods that appears remarkably accurate. Silver constructs a fascinating analysis of the complicated, nuanced, layered dynamics of labor unrest and capitalist perpetuation.

"The insight that labor and labor movements are continually made and remade provides an important antidote to the common tendency to be overly rigid in specifying who the working class is (be it the nineteenth-century craftworkers or the twentieth-century mass production workers). Thus, rather than seeing an "historically superseded" movement or a "residual endangered species", our eyes are open to the early signs of new working class formation as well as "back-

lash” resistance from those working classes being “unmade.” A key task becomes the identification of emerging responses from below to both the creative and destructive sides of capitalist development.”

She makes good use of a double paradigm understanding of labor insurgencies—Karl Polanyi-types are ones characterized by “the backlash resistances to the spread of a global self-regulating market,” where workers or others are resisting the uprooting of traditional ways of doing things, or the destruction of their livelihoods, or the loss of their jobs. Karl Marx-types are those where “newly-emerging working classes” are fighting as they are fully subjected to market discipline and their collective power is strengthened as “an unintended outcome of the development of historical capitalism.” Silver sees world capitalism as swinging back and forth between a crisis of profitability and a crisis of legitimacy.

Against this overarching set of contradictory dynamics, she also smartly identifies “a continual struggle not only over defining the content of working-class “rights” but also over the types and numbers of access to those rights. How—and how quickly—a new crisis of legitimacy/profitability is reached is determined in large part by “spatial strategies”—efforts to draw “boundaries” delineating who will be “cut in” and who will be “left out.” This boundary drawing process is a key to understanding capitalist counterattacks against strengthening workers, but importantly it is also a key to understanding the way workers create identities (based on nation, race, gender, etc.) that distance them from self-identification as workers.

*Forces of Labor* also breaks down different ways capital alters the terrain of contestation—product fix, technological fix, spatial/geographic fix, financial fix. A detailed discussion of the leading industry of the 19th century, textiles, is juxtaposed to a similar treatment of the 20th century’s lead industry, automobiles. Ultimately Silver attacks the premise of a “race to the bottom,” arguing that class struggles have been displaced by the aforementioned fixes, never eliminated and never put to rest. She applies her theory to the present and future, trying to guess which industry might play a “leading” role in the 21st century, and while unsure, she points to Education (producing workers), and transportation (moving everything around) as likely candidates. She’s also unabashed in predicting that the next wave of Marx-style labor unrest will appear in China.

She departs from the somewhat self-referential arena of labor unrest in the last two sentences of the book, which took me by surprise.

“While the overlap between the racial and wealth divides on a world-scale has been consolidated, environmental degradation has proceeded at a pace and scale unprecedented in human history. Thus the ultimate challenge faced by the workers of the world in the early twenty-first century is the struggle, not just against one’s own exploitation and exclu-

sion, but for an international regime that truly subordinates profits to the livelihood of all.

All in all a smart book with a lot to think about.



### The Trouble With Music

by Mat Callahan

Oakland, Calif.:  
AK Press, 2004

\$15.00

ISBN 1-904859-14-3

reviewed by Chris Carlsson

**T**HE TROUBLE WITH MUSIC IS A BRILLIANT, much-needed book. Drowning in the white noise of modern life, “the trouble with music” is the trouble with life in general. Callahan’s passionate prose dissects with surgical precision the dynamics by which our common wealth, in this case our innate ability to share joy and community through making music, is turned into a product to be purchased, diminishing our basic humanity in the process.

“Music originates in the human body. I sing, clap my hands, stamp my feet. This is literally universal in an even more fundamental way than speech... Music making is rooted in these simple acts that bring delight to the one doing them, which is then increased when one is joined by others... This kind of relationship to music could abolish the sonic adornment; simply wipe it out with the lived experience of people making music themselves... It is precisely because music can play a vital role in freeing people and challenging the forces of oppression that confusion is being sewn and the false is being substituted for the genuine article... the trouble with music is that it is out of control. It provides a human connection to the cosmos that defies domination of any kind. It militates against the very forces that would turn everything from the water we drink and the air we breathe into products for consumption and profit.”

His years in all sides of the “business” of music qualifies him like few others to reveal the inner workings of both the creative passion that produces good music, how we might come to a new understanding of what “good music” actually is, and how banal commodification has flooded our world with “anti-music.” For musicians and listeners, rockers and rappers, clerks and toe-tappers, *The Trouble With Music* will widen your view, deepen your pleasure and reinforce your justified rage.

PW

# BURNING MAN

## A WORKING-CLASS, DO-IT-YOURSELF WORLD'S FAIR

Chris Carlsson

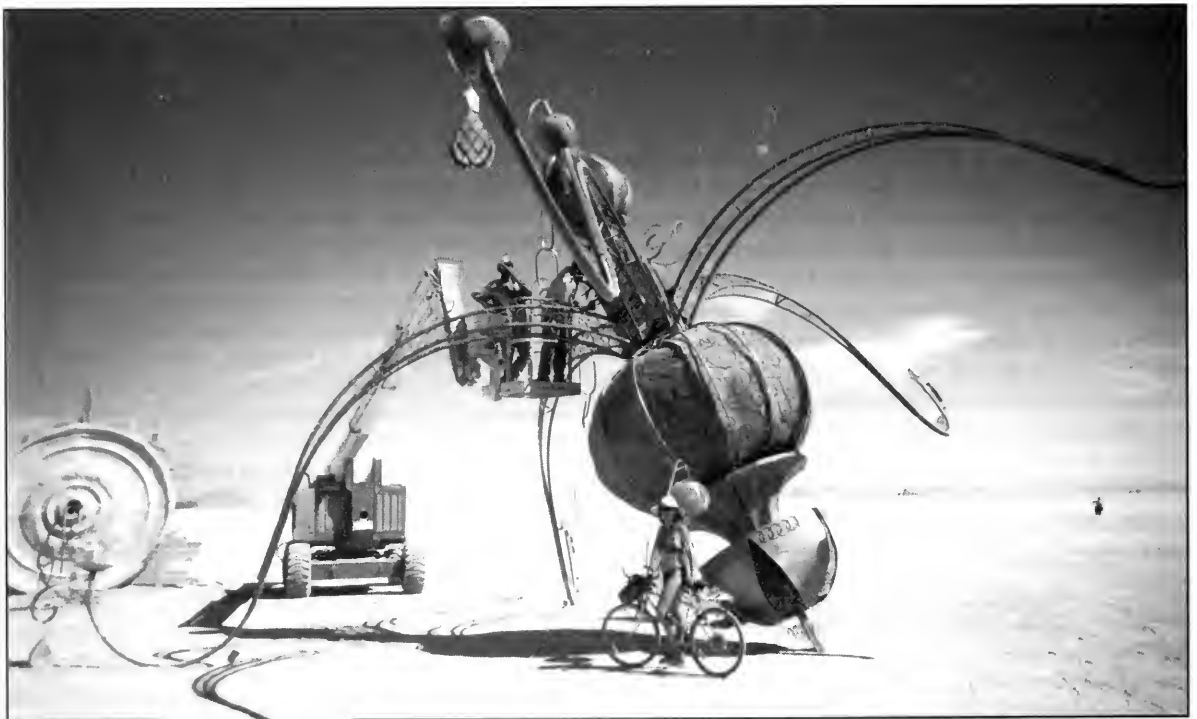
"After a while, the festival's emphasis on hedonism and overt displays of sexuality can seem like a hipster straitjacket and the overtones of New Age spirituality a gloss for a new type of vapid and self-congratulatory consumerism.... The essential point of Burning Man is not what it is now but what it suggests for the future, which is not just a new cultural form but the possibility of a new way of being, a kind of radical openness toward experience that maintains responsibility for community. Radical openness means no closure, perpetual process and transformation, and embracing paradox, contradiction, and uncomfortable states. Every instant becomes synchronistic, every contact a contact high."

—DANIEL PINCHBECK

EAST OF SACRAMENTO ON INTERSTATE 80, I glance to my left as a pickup truck overtakes me. A blonde woman wearing devil's horns is flashing me an electrifying smile, gesturing and mouthing: Are you going to Burning Man? I smile back, nod, and give her the thumb's up. She pumps both arms tri-

umphantly, and as they pull away, I'm left euphoric by the mysteriously powerful connection that passed from one metal box to another.

Hours later, having cleared the mighty Sierra Nevada not far removed from where starving Chinese coolies chiseled out the first transcontinental railroad tracks through howling blizzards, I passed the neon blandness of Reno's unmajestic skyline, gassed up, and proceeded into the desolation of the Great Basin. Leaving the interstate behind, I entered the world of rural Nevada, Indian tacos and trailers scattered among riparian oases, separated by countless miles of arid but spectacular landscape. The road is crowded with trailers, buses, mid-sized sedans, usually carrying bicycles on the back, clearly all heading north to the playa. One dirt road leaves to



Everything is oversized at Burning Man. Here, far from the urbanized Black Rock City lies a chandelier, at this point, still under construction. Next page, two views of a giant Solar Trike.

ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE BY CHRIS CARLSSON

the right, and under some rare shade a couple is busy spray painting bicycles light blue against the tawny, dusty ground.

The mountain range that marks the end of the state highway at the towns of Empire and Gerlach looms ahead. Dust clouds appear to the east, kicked up by arrivals preceding me. No sooner do I see them than my throat cracks, the taste of dust on my tongue. Twenty minutes later I'm crawling in bumper to bumper traffic completely immersed in gusting dust-filled winds, awaiting an inspection that rivals airport security as "Rangers" try to ferret out scofflaws and stowaways. License plates hail from New York, Illinois, Oregon, British Columbia, Minnesota, all points between. Newly legalized Black Rock City radio is pumping tunes into the car, interspersed with occasional warnings that impossibly well-hidden stowaways will not elude the Rangers.

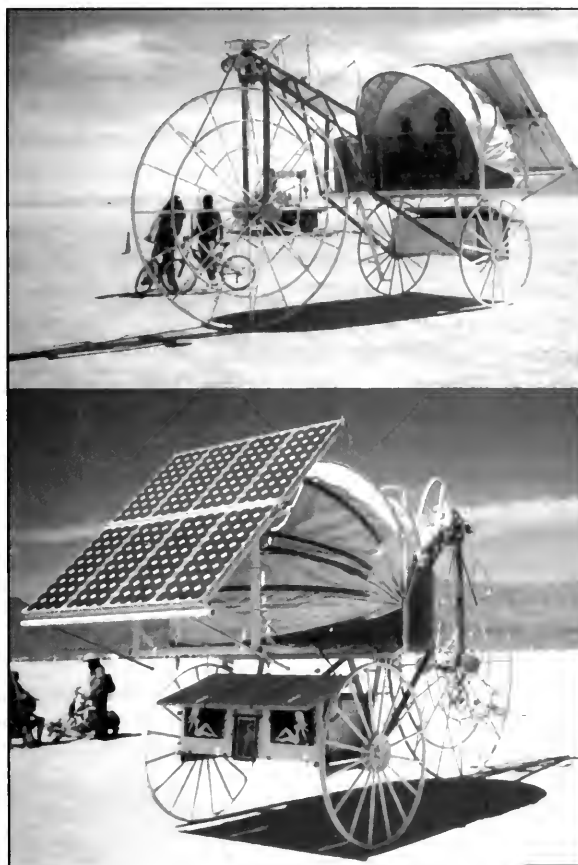
Signs line the incoming roadway. "Barter is just another word for commerce." "Don't Trade it, Pay it Forward." And dozens of others. After a brief search for the camp location, I park. The dust thickened on the car as I spent the next five days exclusively bicycling around Black Rock City.

Tuesday night: like a moth drawn to the light in the inky darkness of the desert, I pedal forward. Some kind of mad scientist has a keyboard hanging over his neck, attached to truck horns and bellows. As his fingers tickle the keys, flames shoot from tubes, pops and groans emerging from invisible holes and crevices. Three dozen cyclists surround the scene, smiling and pointing while background drum and bass machine add to the sound.

I take a ride in the 37-foot-high "Olivator," a vertical chair ascent for a calm view of the lasers and neon lights chasing each other across the nighttime playa. A dozen pyrocycles ride by, each towing a trailer with an oil derrick on it, spouting flame at the top. Later I am nearly run over by a motorized float full of people peering out of a TV screen, labeled "Sony Tripatron"... Two bikes tow a three-piece percussion ensemble, bass and trap drum set... At the camp called Bollywood an unbelievable rock 'n roll film from 1965 screens, *Gumnaam* or something like that... a blues band rocks the house at Hair of the Dog bar, a long-time installation at Black Rock City.

Another day, a dusty sun-soaked morning, early risers scurry about while others prepare to crash from the night's endless party. Cycling about, I encounter on the playa a copy of Bill Gates' *The Road Ahead*, spread open to a page on frictionless capitalism, awaiting the arrival of art cars to run over it. Returning to the city streets, I'm accosted by a guy with a bullhorn next to a late model SUV. On it a camping chair says "soccer mom." He's yelling, "If you love Burning Man, come and pee on this Soccer Mom's SUV!"

One midweek evening we ride through gusting waves of dust to the "Man" to catch Reverend Billy and his Church of Stop-Shopping Revue; a big gospel chorus in gold lamé gowns swayed behind his syncopated sermonizing... it was funny and much more overtly political than the usual Burning Man



fare. I particularly love their finale as they sing "We Ain't Sponsored, we ain't sponsored, we ain't sponsored..."

### One-Hour Scrutinizing

I went to Burning Man in 2003 as a self-designated "Official Scrutinizer," with a brief questionnaire offering passersby heavy or light scrutiny. "Heavy scrutiny" meant a 45-minute audio interview, "light scrutiny" quickly scribbled answers to a dozen multiple choice questions. My "performance" led to twenty-four quality interviews and countless fantastic conversations. I wanted to explore my assumptions about class consciousness among participants, to find out who they were, what they did the rest of the year, how they contextualized the experience, etc.

Those I encountered filled a range of occupations: health educator/social worker, transportation planner, teacher, math professor (retired), testing and counselor of street kids, homeless youth study coordinator, welder/metal fabricator, software tester, human resources manager, environmental biochemist, teacher, freelance high tech research/marketing, handyman/auto mechanic, community development and technology consultant, computer repairman and apartment manager, teacher/ex-dot.com content provider, political organizer, immigration legal aide, veterinary assistant, house

painter, builder, president marketing services/open source software company, business/technology consultant.

They covered a full age range, too: 23-30: seven; 32-40: seven; 41-50: five; 51-63: five. Of the thirteen women and eleven men I spoke with, the vast majority believed there is a ruling class (20), while their own class identification was confused at best: 7 middle class; 5 working class; 7 both; 3 neither; 2 didn't know. Not surprisingly, nearly all of the respondents were white (though a smattering of people of color do attend). And due to my approach, the group was a self-selecting subset of the larger population, people drawn to the notion of "scrutiny," analysis, thinking, reflection. It is difficult to generalize about 29,000 people, and perhaps not worth trying. Also, many have abandoned Burning Man over the years for a variety of reasons. Thus, this inquiry is not an attempt to confront all the criticisms or objections to Burning Man that are held.

In fact, I am not trying to defend the institution at all—for an institution is what it has become! My own attempt to interact with the organizers of Burning Man led to a puzzling and ultimately absurd exchange with a self-designated media committee representative going by the moniker 'Brother John'. I thought to communicate my intentions to this committee as a courtesy. Much to my surprise my first email led to a response "rejecting" my "request," misunderstanding my own past atten-

dance, and admonishing me to come to the festival to just experience it. According to Brother John, after I'd soaked it up for a year I could make a proposal the committee might "approve." I was shocked and wrote back my rejection of their authority. Brother John then indicated that he realized it was a relationship based on mutual agreement and they could not regulate me if I didn't accept it, but that the Burning Man Media Committee would expect me to submit to them anything I wrote PRIOR to publication! I stopped myself from responding that this policy violated all journalistic autonomy and was more akin to the Pentagon's approach to war coverage than the ostensible free community of Burning Man. I held my tongue and chose to ignore them from that time on.

Other complaints about the allocation of money to artists, the occasionally heavy-handed exercise of authority by drunken Black Rock City rangers, the airport security shake-down at the gates to catch stowaways, the ever-rising price of entry, etc., have been noted elsewhere. While I am aware of the many ways to criticize the failures of Burning Man, my own goal in attending, interviewing and writing was different, as you'll see.

### Commerce-free Gift Economy

"If Burning Man is a cult, it is above all a cult of transformation."  
—Daniel Pinchbeck<sup>2</sup>

"... The campsite counters the isolation in which most of the people we met live year-round..." —Margaret Cerullo and Phyllis Ewen<sup>3</sup>

The people who come to Burning Man would never say—or even think—so, but clearly the vast majority are part of the sprawling American working class. When they're not at BM they have to go to work, mostly living from paycheck to paycheck and on credit. Once a year, for fun, they go on an expedition to the desert along with 29,000 others. And what do they do? They "set up" on the blank dusty slate of the white, flat playa. Then they live in a densely populated city and have a totally urban experience. But it's a familiar and strangely different city life. The lack of infrastructure beyond porta-potties and the semi-circular layout of Black Rock City leaves room for the harsh nature of the desert to impose itself. Commerce is formally excluded (with the notable exceptions of ice and the Center Camp café).

I asked my scrutineers how they felt about the commitment to a cash-free "gift economy." Most people were genuinely enthusiastic. Several emphasized that it was a major reason for their coming. "...I am so attracted to Burning Man because for close to a week I can exist without ever having to spend money, without ever having to worry about people asking for money—it's just eliminated." For a school teacher it is a "mental vacation, a sense of relief," while a female metal worker thought it "kind of hypocritical," mostly because of the espresso sales at Center Camp. One computer geek claimed "I would love to live



Be a Salaryman No More,  
Burning Man 2003

in the gift economy 365 days a year!" Some of the lower wage participants, a handyman and a veterinary assistant, were adamant: "That's why I come here," and "I think life should be like this, it's the only way to live." A Berkeley apartment manager, who also fixes computers, described it as "a natural human impulse that is given free reign and encouraged here. It's just a normal thing that people want to do."

The commerce-free environment is "imperative. I wouldn't come here otherwise," said a street counselor, while a retired human resources staffer emphasized "it's the thing that inspired me and drew me to Burning Man... Doing something because you love to do it rather than because you have to do it is always refreshing and wonderful..." For one person the commerce-free environment was a means to break down class assumptions based on consumption patterns. "Here nobody cares how much money I make because I have all these other things to offer. Also the people who have a lot of money are able to see people who maybe have almost nothing—they scrimp and they save every single penny they have to come here—[while] it's just like another vacation for the wealthy."

Not everyone "buys" the story Burning Man tells itself: "I don't think it really is a commerce-free environment... it doesn't mean much to me to have this contrived, one-week gift economy. I see efforts

to create alternatives, or to transform the world we live in, [get] co-opted and integrated by the dominant society. There is a gift economy that already exists, the living culture in people's daily lives, and Burning Man is a co-optation of it, selling it back to people. It's a product, like ethical consumerism in some ways..."

Thousands of "alternative" people go to the northern Nevada desert and build a miniature Las Vegas. Neon light and techno-music and amenities of urban night life are trucked along. A lot of people bring everything they want: the RV, the pavilion, the sinks, the astroturf, the refrigerators and everything else. They lack for nothing and could almost be in the suburbs. Ironically, people come here to escape, but recreate a version of the world they left behind, down to the carpet on the floor and the wetbar in the corner.

"Family camping embodies many anticapitalist yearnings and a dream of a different life... It is a dream in which there are no great inequalities and in which the market does not determine human relationships. Yet paradoxically, these preindustrial fantasies tie people more tightly into the market. Mass production and mass marketing have made family camping possible for working-class people. Families go further into debt in order to make the investment in camping equipment. The experience of nature is mediated by commodities." —Margaret Cerullo and Phyllis Ewen<sup>4</sup>

Burning Man is a countercultural expression of the working class yearnings described in the 1982 article above (read it again, replacing "family camping" with "Burning Man"). The fabled nudity, wild art, rave music, drugs and sex are all manifestations of the specific subcultures that attend, but underneath the spectacular behaviors are regular people. Once away from the stifling conformity of "normal life" (especially work life), people are free to experiment with costume, identity, and group behaviors in ways that are difficult at home. For most attendees, Burning Man is a different world subjectively.

One way to see Burning Man is as a Do-It-Yourself World's Fair. The much-touted freeing of imagination it embodies leads to entertaining and inspiring art projects from sculpture and installation to fire-breathing dragons and galleons with crowded bars inside. Moreover, the preponderant ethic of do-it-yourself art-making begins to permeate most interactions, deepening human connections in ways that are usually absent in daily lives. Art is alienated from everyday life by being commodified and separated, but

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**Burning Man is a nascent attempt of the working class, not as a class per se, but as people who refuse to be mere workers, to recompose itself, and in so doing, to transcend class and the capitalist organization of life that stunt our humanity.**

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Burning Man places art at the center of human activity. BM slips an exciting notion into the back of its participants' minds: our greatest collective art project is living together. Every activity can be engaged artistically. One can find in anything a sense of aesthetic pleasure, communicative depth, and resonance with something true and passionate. The art of living becomes something tangible and reinforced by recurrent surprises of gift-giving and cooperation.

Burning Man is an enormous experiment in relearning to speak to each other directly, and reopening and using public spaces. It's a hands-on, throats-on, tongues-on experience. You learn to meet strangers with an open heart. Participants practice trust in a practical context removed from "normal life." Skill sharing, experimentation and appropriation of the techno-sphere for pleasure, edification and self-expression point to a deeper practical radicalization than what is usually attributed to Burning Man.

Like anything worth doing, Burning Man is fraught with contradictions. But within them are impulses and behaviors that connect to a wider social movement that exceeds the self-conceptions of its participants. Burning Man is a nascent attempt of the working class, not as a class per se, but as people who refuse to be mere workers, to recompose itself, and in so doing, to transcend class and the capitalist organization of life that stunt our humanity.



## Pyrocycles

Pyrocycles was a mobile pyrotechnic installation designed for, but not limited to, Burning Man 2003. The theme of the 2003 festival was Beyond Belief which invited the event-goers to look at the mysteries of faith and spirituality and that which is sacred. The dominant interpretations of this ranged from a return to a tribalistic neo-paganism to empty reflections on a lost spirituality to outright parodies of Christianity. Ours, however, differed in that it brought the reality of President Bush's political maneuverings in Iraq to the Black Rock Desert. The message is simply that the actual reality of the war in Iraq and the forces behind it must be not be forgotten in a festival where the participants are meant to look beyond our consciousness.

Pyrocycles built upon the propane-music technology used by the Octopus Car. Instead of a single vehicle with a centralized controller for the sequencing of the flames, it was a decentralized and kinetic system. There were eight units, each consisting of a bicyclist towing a trailer. Atop each trailer was an aluminum tower, over ten feet high, resembling an oil derrick with a constant small burning flame. Larger bursts of fire were controlled by the cyclist through an electronics controller on the handlebars. With the ability to modulate the frequency and the size of the propane bursts while riding the trailers around, the cyclists could orchestrate a unique visual-musical performance. Because we were on bicycles, we were a lot more approachable and friendly than most fire-based installations, which usually try to scare people with large fireballs.

The depiction of oil rigs in a desert environment was intended to evoke the landscape of oil-rich countries in the Middle East. By towing rigs behind human-powered vehicles, we were emphasizing the backwards nature of our society's dependence on fossil fuels, and the subordination of our energy and foreign policy to that dependence.

Reaction to the Pyrocycles project was mixed. Despite the explicitly political underpinnings of Burning Man, for many participants it is a determinedly apolitical space. For those seeking an escape from the politics of Iraq and the myriad of other unpleasantities they face, flaming oil rigs were a not-so-subtle reminder of the world they wanted to leave behind. Many other viewers, however, were struck by the appropriateness of the icons and their receptions ranged from amusement to deep appreciation of the piece.

On a purely aesthetic basis, the rhythmic effect of the flame and the clean lines of the metalwork were well received, and the bikes often drew a crowd that followed the riders around. Because of the control afforded to the riders, in many cases we were able to provide a pyromusical accompaniment to bands or DJs, which added an extra visual layer to their performances.

On a more detailed level, each of the trailers was adorned with the Pyrocycles logo as well as an individual icon representing a modern-day apocalypse. Like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, each bicyclist spread its form of destruction from a different direction on the compass. The apocalypses are War, Media, Religion, Overpopulation, Environmental Pollution, Globalization, Corporatization and Oil.

Shown at: Burning Man, August-September, 2003 / Scott Kildall, [scott@kildall.com](mailto:scott@kildall.com)  
Project designers: Brett Bowman, Scott Kildall, Sasha Magee, Mark Woloschuk



David Best makes amazing temples year after year at Burning Man. This is 2003's Temple of Hope, burned on the last day of Burning Man, the day after the "Man" itself is immolated.



## Class Dismissed?

"These are people without any well-integrated social place. Their lives are characterized by job instability, geographic mobility, divorce and remarriage, and distance from relatives... If "getting away from it all" represented an escape, it was an imperfect one... If it was an industrial nightmare they sought to escape, it was the products of industrial civilization that offered themselves to aid and abet their escape. If it was an escape from work and the clock they envisioned, they found the very meaning and experience of leisure defined and circumscribed by the images and rhythms and moral valuations of work." —Margaret Cerullo and Phyllis Ewen

America is in denial about class. This society insists that there's no such thing (and of course there's no history either, only nostalgia, the Civil War and WWII). Ultimately, class is about power. Some people make decisions about the shape of our lives and then there's the rest of us. We have to work to survive. If you *have* to work, you're in the working class. You might be making \$65K/yr. but you aren't in control of what you do, how it's shaped, what technologies are used, nothing. You may live paycheck to paycheck, but because you are "well paid," and have been told you are "professional," you don't identify as a worker. Big deal, they've always had well-paid workers.

U.S. politics tends to gravitate around claims of what's good or bad for the "middle class," a group that ostensibly includes everyone but the bag ladies and street homeless on one side and the Leer-jetsetting super-rich on the other. The most confusing piece of this puzzle in the past decades has been the gradual disappearance of the working class, replaced

in some politicians' speeches by references to "working families," or in the rhetoric of leftist organizers as "working people," but defrocked of its status as a class. Many people in blue and white-collar jobs think of themselves as middle class, a self-affirming status maintained by shopping properly.

The term "class" has lost a great deal of meaning in the United States. Does this collapse of meaning correspond to a disappearance of referents? Are we living in a classless society? Of course not. But the conceptual tools required to understand and make sense of this society have been radically degraded. The key missing arrow in our empty quiver is the one that pierces class society, that explains the systemic dynamics that produce a small group of extremely wealthy at one pole, and an ever greater number of impoverished at the other. Between the extremes of untold wealth and absolute immiseration<sup>6</sup> most of us live quiet lives, coping as best we can with the cards we're dealt.

In the U.S., where even the poorest 10% are wealthier than 2/3 of the world's population,<sup>7</sup> decades of cold war, consumerist propaganda, and a balkanized humanities curriculum have atomized the population into market niches and an endless series of personal crises. The notion that the vast majority of us, who have nothing to sell but our labor and are consequently utterly dependent on wages and salaries for our survival, are part of a broad class of people sharing a funda-

mental relationship to power and wealth in this society, is an idea that has been overwhelmed and dismissed.

When I asked my interviewees if they identify with the label “middle class,” “working class,” neither or both, I got wonderfully complex responses. A 63-year-old retired math professor explained, “I’m what they used to call *déclassé*. My parents were working class. I raised myself up to the middle class, and now ... University profes-

sors—people with an upper middle class income and a sub-lower class mentality!” A 34-year-old social worker from Australia called himself “polyglot: I grew up in a string of mining towns and worked as a miner, but my parents were university educated and so was I in a country where that’s rarer than here.” The female metal worker put it bluntly: “I would say working class, definitely, I don’t make enough money to be middle class.” A mid-20s teacher, on his way from the east to the northwest, explained, “I work. I don’t really think about [class] for me. I think about it for my parents. My mom was a nurse, my dad was a firefighter. We were middle America, right down the middle.” A clown, who survives in San Francisco as a veterinary assistant, reinforced the resistance I encountered to questions about class. “I try not to think about it much. Like what class I belong to... probably working poor... It’s only an issue when someone else makes it an issue.” An NGO staffer in Berkeley in her late-30s characterized her own ambivalence and downward mobility thusly: “Absolutely I’m a middle class person. My parents were both lawyers. I was born into the middle class in Berkeley... But I am definitely the American working class. I live paycheck to paycheck. I don’t own my home. I’m a wage slave...”

A 35-year-old Canadian making his first trip to Burning Man had one of the more unusual responses: “Neither. Because I cycle [between] jobs that pay ridiculously well [and those that don’t]. For the least amount of work I’ve gotten paid the highest wage and for the hardest work I’ve gotten shit wages. I’m not middle class because I’ve been upper class and I’ve been lower class. I was the plant manager, so I had about 150 employees underneath me. Right now I’m working as an industrial cleaner at a ready-to-eat plant that makes sausages. I hose everything down with high pressure, high-temperature



Burning Man 2003 media.

water, apply some chemicals that eat away at protein and then rinse it off and sanitize it. Then government inspectors inspect it. When people say ‘what do you do?’ I still say I’m a biochemist... [As a plant manager] I sat down and thought ‘why am I always tired?’ It’s because I’m not doing what I want to do. Which led me to other questions: ‘Well, what is it I DO want to do?’ I don’t know. ‘Well, how do I find out what to do?’ They don’t teach ethics in school. They don’t teach rational thinking processes in school. They don’t teach you how to survive on your own. They teach you how to incorporate into the system, how to be a dependent.”

After finding out how people labeled themselves I asked what the word ‘class’ means to them, and how people fall into one or another class.

“I tend to think that there’s only two classes: there’s the people that have the levers of power and then there’s the rest of us... I come here for the chaos and spontaneity to purposefully forget that manner of thinking.”

“Class means primarily the degree of economic self-determination that you’re able to exercise.”

“I think if you know someone’s class, you won’t know anything about them... I think [class is] what gets us into trouble.”

“Class to me is a relationship, like capital is a relationship... it’s usefulness as an analytic category has been somewhat deflated. At the same time that I think it is still a very real thing.”

“Smash it. It’s ridiculous, it’s horrible, it puts value on very few things and it’s all run by the almighty dollar.”

“Class is a strata, it’s a way of distinguishing groups so you know what boundaries to set for yourself... I think that class distinction is more important as you go further along and get higher up because you stand to lose more.”

"One definition is you are born into or enter as a result of your actions. Another is a sense of upbringing and education. Or your current circumstances. For example, my father is a taxi driver and I live in a neighbourhood surrounded by factories, sweat-shops and prostitution. My last form of semi-regular income was as a labourer on construction sites, and I am regularly un/under-employed. Seemingly working class. However, I also went to a pretty prestigious high school, have a bachelors degree in fine arts and currently work as a community service provider, pretty middle class."

"It means access to resources... it's also a way of recognizing excellence... There's some people that I really admire and look up to and I consider them to be 'higher class' in a way."

"Class means being able to walk out of your wind-blown, sand-blown domicile without a shower in five days, looking fabulous! That is class... My idea of class has nothing to do with money. It has to do with education... blue collar is class. These people know their shit. But those who know, and those who can teach and those who can show and those who just are by example, that's class, heavy class."

"All class distinctions are subjective, there are no objective class classifications."

"I don't understand class distinctions personally. I don't need money to do a lot of things, so I feel wealthy."

"Well birth is a lot of it... I don't get the class thing, by the way. I think part of it is about self-imposed limitations, and that's really tragic."

"Largely birth. Birth, then education."

The prevailing amnesia and confusion results from a complex set of overlapping dynamics. "Globalization" is the all-purpose buzzword describing the redesign of work, the relocation of production within and without national borders, the rolling back of unions and the welfare state, and the rapid and extreme concentration of wealth and power. Another way of stating it is that since the ebbing of profits in the mid-1970s, capital has carried out a worldwide counterat-

tack. The "just-in-time" pace of work (some call it "Toyotaism"), the redesign and redevelopment of cities, the computerization of production, the huge increase of incarceration, the unprecedented wave of human migration within and across borders, all have contributed to a growing isolation for individuals. Where once there were stable communities, neighborhoods, and familiar faces at workplaces, where one might work for decades, now people move from place to place and job to job, whipped by unrelenting insecurity and the threat of being left behind.

## The End of Community—Long Live Community!

"Long working hours, the breakup of long-term personal associations, and, most important, the disappearance of women from neighborhoods during the day have accelerated the decline of civil society, the stuff of which the amenities of everyday life are made. In the 1980s and 1990s membership in voluntary organizations such as the Parent-Teachers' Association, veterans' groups, and social clubs declined but, perhaps more to the point, many of them lost activists, the people who kept the organizations together. Labor unions, whose membership erosion was as severe as it was disempowering, became more dependent on full-time employees to conduct organizing, political action, and other affairs as rank-and-file leaders disappeared into the recesses of the nonstop workplace. The cumulative effect of this transformation is the hollowing out of participation and democracy where it really counts, at the grass roots."

—STANLEY ARONOWITZ

What we've lived through in the last 30 years is a radical decomposition of the working class. Of course two world wars wrought more destruction and unraveled societies more completely, but the reorganization of life and work since the late 1970s has broken down communities and ways of life that impeded profitability. Consequently, the world is now much more transient. Everywhere people are in motion in the greatest wave of human migration in history. Jobs have been



exported, new people have arrived with different cultures, languages, memories and expectations. In the few places that are relatively stable, the influx rapidly alters labor markets, urban density, housing, transportation, pollution, and social tension. Even in the U.S., the chances of living at the same address for more than five years is fairly small. Then there's the casualization of work, the rise of temporary employment, contract labor, and the breakdown of careers and permanent jobs. Nobody lasts at any given job longer than a few years anymore. And there is no future at a given job. Unless you are a nurse, doctor, or something like that, most people freelance. That fragmentary existence lacks a real sense of shared community, neighborhood, street life, or work life. The old ways of being in community have broken down.

This breakdown of communities and families is a result of the furious pace of life under contemporary capitalism. Conveniently for the needs of capital, it is precisely within those lost social networks that alternative knowledge and counter-narratives were kept alive and passed along. As the traditional communities of workplace and neighborhood have been ripped asunder by plant closings, urban redevelopment, and the new transience, the historical memories of communities that had organized and resisted unfettered exploitation in the past have nearly been lost too. Popular movements with memories of their own political power based on collective action, have diminished as the physical foundations have been kicked out from beneath them.

But this process is as old as capitalism itself. What we are living through is just the latest in a cycle that Italian theorists of the autonomist school have framed with the concept of "class composition."<sup>10</sup> Since capital's counterattack began in

the mid-1970s, working class composition has been systematically altered, or "decomposed". By the late 1960s movements across the planet had pushed for shortened working hours and increased pay, but crucially, had begun contesting the very definitions of life and work and the reasons why we live the way we do. The oil shock of 1973-74 was the first loud response of a world capitalist elite afraid of losing its power and determined to rein in an unruly working class by re-imposing austerity and fear of unemployment.<sup>11</sup> Historic wage highs were reached in the early 1970s in the U.S. and elsewhere. Since that time, working hours have been radically intensified and in the 1990s absolutely lengthened, while wages in real dollars have remained constant or diminished. In spite of an economy four times larger than it was in 1980 (as measured by the terribly inaccurate and misleading Gross Domestic Product, or GDP) in the early 21st century we are working more hours per year and working much harder, but life has not improved. Most people are just glad to have work and income in a world where "falling" is perceived as a real possibility, where one doesn't have to look beyond the next street corner to see how abject life can be if you don't stay in the good graces of ever-more demanding employers.

Burning Man promises its participants a reclaimed, revitalized, reborn sense of community. Upon arrival everyone is greeted with a hearty "welcome home" even if they've never been there before. I asked my scrutinees what the word 'community' means:

— "The opposite of feeling isolated and unsupported... a feeling of being able to lean on your neighbor."

— "An investment looking for a payback."

— "Where you can lean on and know your neighbors, you help each other out... You're easy to control when you're just one person with no strong community backing."

— "Something that has its real and its ideal sides. The ideal is a lot of sharing and thoughtfulness and planning to make sure everyone's ok. And the real one is knowing that that's the best way to take it, but not always having the courage to do that."

— "The common ground constantly has to be renegotiated or re-evaluated... community here is interesting because of its temporariness... You can't ever step outside how our societal relations are influenced by capitalism but you can certainly try, and I think Burning Man is a possibility."

— "An environment, doing things and being... It's a platform for playing with ideas about everyday life."

— "All the parts dependent on each other, all working together, living and non-living."

— "Shared purpose, shared values."



Center Camp at the center of the Burning Man wheel shape.

Another type is based on geography, and is based on default... The most profound meaning is a sense of identity.”

— “Involvement, equality and respect, safety, love.”

— “Oh God. Such an overused word in the Bay Area, such a code word... drop the community in any speech and it shows that you’re a good person and that you value human interaction. It’s become the ‘motherhood and apple pie’ of the left... Community ideally is a group of people together whether by choice or circumstance, who feel a shared interest, a shared destiny, a shared responsibility... it’s so temporary and so tenuous [at Burning Man] and you can just leave if you want, which is not what real community is about. A real community, you can’t just pick up and go, it would matter if you left.”

The normal impulse in life is to cooperate and to do things together. The market and the capitalist economy seeks to break that. You are tacitly pressured to hold back so you can then sell to somebody, instead of sharing your skills and energy. Burning Man is a chance to experience unmediated cooperation. The deeper truth of living is somehow briefly tasted here as an extreme experience, but it’s actually quite normal. People seek community, to connect with each other in authentic ways, regardless of the contradictions inherent in the expensive Burning Man experience. BM provides a context to create trust, which leads people to envision other kinds of living and to share efforts to bring it about.

## Making Technology Ours

One of the constituent elements of the emerging culture visible at Burning Man is a classically working class predisposition for tinkering, playing, innovating and doing things that are useful. And doing it with a real sense of rugged individualist independence: “I can fix that. I don’t need anybody to tell me how to do that, I can do it myself.” In spite of the individualist ethic, it’s always a collective process, handing down knowledge and techniques. Technology, gadgets, electronics—this is how a lot of Americans do art, albeit often unconsciously. At Burning Man people share machinery and electric light and urbanization in a heavily technological event. As one of the teachers I interviewed put it, “Everything here is technology, all these bikes, the flames, the domes, the pyramids, that’s all technology.” But people have very different ideas about technology, often independent of their own engagement with it.

An avid bicyclist, who got involved repairing bikes at her first Burning Man described herself as a technophobe. “When I hear ‘technology’ and ‘tinkerer,’ I don’t relate that to fixing bikes for some reason.” Our biochemist, who is as high-tech as a person can be, explained, “Back in the ‘50s they said all this technology was going to save time. Well it didn’t. I’ve got less time than I would have even 20 years ago.”

A former software engineer hilariously characterized herself this way: “I’m pretty low-tech here, although I have a titanium computer, a color printer, a laminating machine and two 80 gig firewire drives and all the equipment. This is my low-tech year... I work, weld, and grind and I’m fabulously happy around tools... I don’t know what I’m doing, it’s great. I am not a trained mechanic. I am not a person who knows any of the crap that I’m doing. I love not having the idea behind me that says ‘no you can’t use this tool for that.’ I don’t know what you use this tool for, fuck it, this is what I’m doin’ with it!”

A social worker who does research on the street observed the same creative involvement: “One of the things I really like at BM is that you see this endless ‘we’re gonna take something and we’re gonna do something different with it, because nothing’s available that let’s us do this thing.’ It’s one of the true joys and delights of being here.”

His colleague was repelled by the heavy dependence on fossil fuels at Burning Man: “...the whole idea of art cars that burn gasoline seems ridiculous. And these flamethrowers are all burning petroleum-based products. But on the other hand gasoline is also used in a lot of different, interesting, creative and beautiful ways... Obviously we couldn’t be out here in this godforsaken place without technology.”

The ability to appropriate the technosphere, make it part of you, make it do what you want, is an essential aspect of self-liberation. Gaining confidence by doing little things can lead to challenging and reshaping bigger things. The crucial part is how the material experience shapes one’s imagination. Burning Man reclaims technological know-how, withdraws it



Burning Man 2003 “schwag,” i.e. gifts!

from market relations and reapplies it to activities and projects whose purpose is pleasure rather than profit. But more importantly, the same logic and practice of technological reappropriation potentially undergirds another life—a post-capitalist life. Radical change on a global scale depends on our cleverness and our skills—and our ability to use technologies in ways that enhance our humanity, our freedom, and are consistent with interdependence and ecological sanity.

### Liberated Work vs. Useless Toil

"The historical emergence of a huge social surplus in industrially advanced capitalist societies, [permitted] a considerable fraction of the population to live outside the wage-labor system, at least for a substantial period of their adult lives. Many are marginals, hippies, freelance artists and writers, and graduate students who never enter the professional or academic workforces except as temporary, part-time workers. Rather than seeking normal, full-time employment in bureaucratic, commercial, or industrial workplaces they prefer to take jobs as office temps or find niches that do not require them to keep their nose to the grindstone, to show up to the job at an appointed hour, or to work for fifty weeks out of the year..."

—STANLEY ARONOWITZ<sup>12</sup>

Burning Man grew out of a subculture of people who recognized that a life worth living takes place outside of wage-labor, in addition to or instead of paid work. Its growth demonstrates a hunger for social experiences outside of the "normal" economic constraints of earning, buying and selling, as a way to deepen and extend human life. For many, it's also an opportunity to do good work, unmediated by the twisted goals of economic life.

The female metal worker captured a typical approach to survival: "I go through phases, I work for a while, and then it'll get to the point where I can take some time off... My life just goes on an as-needed basis. When I can afford time then I take time, when I can't afford time then I make the money so I can afford time later."

The ex-dotcommer would like to survive as a cartoonist, but expressed a dark realism, typical of many in her generation: "I'm not sure if I can get money doing what really lights me up. So I would rather do something menial with my hands, or work in a café or something, to free up my creative energy to work on my own projects."

The veterinary assistant/clown straddles the split life: "Money is something I need to survive, and work is something I need to do to have money to survive, and I have a job that I don't hate. That's not what I am, that's part of what I am, but I'm a lot more complex than that."

An NGO staffer who emailed his questionnaire from Vancouver emphasized his different subjective experience when "working" at Burning Man. "There's a considerably

higher level of fun with these engagements—not only because of the type of work, but also because the knowledge of the end result, the work's temporality and the personal connections that I have with the work."

The apartment manager who also fixes computers admitted, "The experience of Burning Man makes my ache greater in my life... I go home, and I'm in planned time and I'm running on clocks, and I don't know how to stop that cycle... I understand what the people who make the rules are telling me I should do with this green paper, but I just don't know how to translate it into something that is fun and satisfying. By contrast, when you get ready for the Burn you work your tailbone off. And because you're creating something different and new and you're challenging yourself, even though it's work, it has this bonus attached. You're doing something that's going to promote your survival, it's going to help other people, it's going to be something really unique."

The handyman/auto mechanic clearly wants out of normal economic life: "I personally hate working for money. If I could work and not have to take money, it would be great. I love what I do. If I could somehow pull it off and not have to accept money, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

Burning Man has a powerful effect on the imagination. It is not "real" liberation, but a temporary faux "escape" from the economy (that costs you hundreds of dollars). Nonetheless, it's a real experiment, and a direct manifestation of yearning. People yearn to escape the limits of economic life, to be more than just "workers." There aren't many chances to experience a crowd of like-minded people, sharing a collective euphoria produced by artistic and technological self-activity. At Burning Man there is a taste of such a post-economic life, even if the sour aroma of the cash nexus is barely hidden beneath the playa.

PW

1. "Heat of the Moment: The Art and Culture of Burning Man," *Artforum magazine*, Nov. 2003
2. *ibid.*
3. "Having a Good Time": The American Family Goes Camping, *Radical America*, Spring 1982, Vol. 16 #1-2
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. "The richest 1% of people in the world receive as much as the bottom 57%, or in other words less than 50 million of the richest people receive as much as the 2.7 billion poorest," from World Bank economist Branko Milanovic, 1999, cited in *After the New Economy* by Doug Henwood, New Press (New York: 2003), p. 132.
7. *Ibid.*
8. This term is fleshed out thoroughly in *Modern Times, Ancient Hours* by Pietro Basso. Verso: London 2003
9. *How Class Works: Power and Social Movements*, (Yale University Press: 2003). p.220
10. A thorough treatment of this tendency is presented in *Storming Heaven: Class composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* by Steve Wright, Pluto Press (London: 2002)
11. For a full analysis of the price of oil in combating working class militancy, first in the so-called First World, then turning the attack to the oil-producing workers themselves later, see *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* by the Midnight Notes collective, Autonomedia (New York: 1992).
12. *How Class Works: Power and Social Movements*, op.cit. p. 59.

# RECLAIM THE COMMONS?

Ztangi Press

THE IDEA OF THE OLD EUROPEAN COMMONS has surfaced recently as a reaction to predatory capitalism's quest to commodify everything. What previous generations understood as public goods, our water for instance, or the broadcast bandwidth, even the air, is today considered fair game for exploitation. Enron, we shouldn't forget, wanted to trade futures on the weather.

The notion that the "market rules" has permeated our consciousness so that thinking critically—outside the box, or, better, outside the package—has been displaced from public discourse. (Critical thought, it seems, has sought refuge in the realm of fiction, where it puts up a rearguard fight.) It should come then as no surprise that those who would like to forge an alliance against this plague of consumerist assumptions fall short of achieving their goals. Packaging the message of resistance may take only a slogan and a graphic, but creating the connections between reality and its effective opposition requires analysis, which presumes insight. And insight comes from challenging appearances to reveal the substance of the domination that forms the core of our existence.

The call to "reclaim the commons" illustrates how "packaging" resistance to global capitalism falls short of expectations. Building a force to overcome universal commodification requires criticizing not its effects, the depletion of all natural resources from fish to forests, for instance, but exposing its central doctrine—the imperative to seize all of reality to create profit.

What is inherent in profit-making? Economically, constant growth. There is no true sustainable "free market" capitalism. Profits need to be invested to expand production to in turn secure more returns. If profits aren't high enough, costs are slashed, no matter the social consequences. All forms of "green capitalism" will remain a marginal phenomenon. If a potential exists to make "real" money, the "ethical" capitalists will just be bought off, bought out or, if they resist, bankrupted by

mega-corporations. We are witnessing this with organic agriculture. And who do you think will ride into town with the latest "alternative" energy device that they will sell us when they have no more oil to sell?

In the area of politics, capital accumulation knows only one form: dictatorship. Is it any wonder that corruption stalks the corridors of power? For capital its "my way or the doorway" on all issues related to making a buck. No obstacles are tolerated.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that capitalism and democracy are not compatible. They are in constant combat.

Is it a surprise which one triumphs? And which one is compromised, or worse? History records a repetitive tale—all efforts at local control of resources are vanquished by economic imperatives.

Facing this devastating reality courts political immobilization. How can we stop this machine? Rage is easy, sabotage appealing, but systematic opposition, methodical and effective—that's another thing.

Let's step back for a minute and take the long view. Piecemeal efforts at reforming capitalism are like sandbagging against a flood: necessary precautions to be sure, but hardly meant as a solution. A more proactive strategy entails systemic reforms that lead to an historic turn like the village market's



WILD ABANDON DANCE PARTY / no one erotically abandoned.

GRAFFITI WWW.STENCILARCHIVE.ORG

transmutation into industrial capitalism, but this time in the direction of democratic control not further consolidation. A reformist strategy like this requires both a thorough, critical, understanding of the workings of capitalism and a vision of a future society incorporating that analysis. Reference to problematic historic occurrences, like the commons, is no substitute for informed analysis. And possession of an analysis without the passion of vision won't sustain us for the long haul.

Historically, in Europe the commons was not a major affair. The lands that the lords and abbots set aside for the use of their serfs amounted to not much more than

a sop to encourage their continuing subservience. In some areas it played a bigger role than in others, but all over Europe, the peasants were in constant upheaval trying to get out from under the thumb of the landlords. As towns emerged and guilds of skilled craftspeople developed in the early Middle Ages, prospects of more autonomy enticed peasants to the towns.

It may be stretching the historic record to say the guilds offered another world of possibility for the peasants. What we can say is that the growing opposition of workers to the rise of industrial capitalism in the 19th Century looked back several centuries and saw it that way.

Today the movement against global capitalism invokes a vision—"another world is possible"—where grassroots movements have wrested control of their situation from global capitalism. At the center of this control is a radical democratic strategy not confined to the deadend of electoral politics but extending to the sphere of the economy.

In Argentina, international financial capital in the form of the International Monetary Fund, decided to pull the plug on the economy. The workers found themselves arriving in the morning at factories abandoned by the owners who absconded with all the cash and left the gates locked. Confronted with this situation, the workers didn't petition the regime, corrupted by years of accepting IMF demands, for compensation, they broke the locks and entered their factories and began running them again, by themselves. That's taking democracy literally.

This development was so successful that all across Argentina communities came to the aid of the workers of reopened factories. Over 200 of them have survived for more than two years with democratic management and are so suc-



cessful that the former owners want them back. Fat chance of that happening.

On the other hand 200 enterprises can't withstand an assault from global capital if one is launched. Argentina has one beachhead for a new economy. It needs international support and replication. An international movement for grassroots rebellion, for workers' self-management and local autonomy needs to spread quickly. The bosses in Argentina made a mess of things, but nothing like the grand disasters that await us due to the rampage for profits on the part of international capitalists—global warming, gmo-manipulation of all our foodstuffs, devastation of the world's forests, oceans and soil.

The outlines of a culture of resistance are emerging. The Argentine workers have seized one aspect of this culture in a dynamic way: for them social property trumps private property.

The indigenous people of the Chiapas show how cooperation produces results where individualism leads to waste.

The conspicuous consumption of our society illustrates how abundance is obvious, but for purposes of political control, scarcity rules.

And lastly, we all seek ways of subverting the dominant sub-ethic of sacrifice, through creative endeavors of all sorts: play and the "gift economy," are not foreign to us.

The prison house that is the market society, with its constraints demanding subservience to profit and hierarchy, is intent on locking us all down. We don't want no stinking garden in the exercise yard, we want the walls torn down! We don't want to breathe the air of restraint, but the fresh breezes of freedom. We don't want the sun filtered through bars, but shining bright on a new world to be built. By us.

PW



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